

Thomas Risager

From D.Min.: Sing Unto The Lord.
Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC
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The Story of Odense United Methodist Church in Odense

More than a 100 years ago, the Skt. Jakobs Church in Odinsgade was so active, dynamic and full of life that the congregation expanded its activities to the outskirts of Odense. In Alexandragade, the new congregation, emerging from the work of Skt. Jakobs Church, began its activities. Soon, they erected a fine new church and named it Emmauskirken.

For almost seventy years, the Methodists preached and lived out their beliefs of personal and social holiness in the town of Odense. Two churches, two orphanages and engaged and caring Christians served the people in and outside the churches. They were respected all over town.

In 1969, a hard decision had to be made. The town center Church, Skt. Jakobs Church, which gave life to Emmauskirken, had declined and the brave decision was made to move all the activities to the newer church, which was no longer in the outskirts of town, but in the new centre, since the growth of Odense in those days was rapid. Church life continued in Emmauskirken, where a lot of people confessed their faith in Jesus and went on to the path of scriptural and social holiness.

Society was changing and the growing welfare of people and the city lead to the city taking hand of the babies and children in the orphanages. Today, the church has a fund from the times with the orphanages that today support a lot of the Children's -, young people's - and the gospel music ministry.

The United Methodist Church served the community and a lot of people from the surrounding buildings confessed their faith and became active members of the church. Young people from the neighborhood were in the children's ministry, the youth ministry or engaged in scouting. The church was full of life and vibrant worship took place twice

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every Sunday. Also, there was a strong youth ministry, which was really active and dynamic. It was lead by one of the people who today is one of the key leaders in the church. During those days, the leadership in the church led the church towards traditionalism.

Time changed a lot but the ways of the church did not really change. The church forgot to pay attention to the changing winds in the society and long time decline was a reality the church boldly faced in the middle of the nineties. For a couple of years, there were a lot of discussions of what needed to be done in order for the church to be attractive again. One of the major changes was to rethink and renew the sanctuary. One of the conditions for the design was that it should be so welcoming to people, that members of the congregation would not be embarrassed if anyone they knew, would attend church. At that time, this didn't happen much. The congregation invested a lot of money, time and effort in this, and the new sanctuary was celebrated and taken into use in 1998.

The church looks old on the outside but it is new and fresh on the inside, just like the hearts of the people in the United Methodist Church in Odense. Since the new sanctuary was taken into use, there has been tremendous change in the church.

Things looked prosperous and the future seemed bright. A new associate pastor was appointed to work together with the senior pastor. It was time to invest in the future for this church, but serious conflict evolved in the midst of the congregation. For more than a year, this threatened the future existence of the church and caused tension in the United Methodist denomination in Denmark.

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The pastoral assignments were changed so the new pastor was appointed senior pastor. This was an arrangement that both pastors and the Pastoral Staff Relations Committee endorsed.

In Odense, the significant and new ministry of a gospel choir, which basically was the only ministry where new people came to the church, were lead to another church in town by the former senior pastor of the Methodist church, as a consequence of the conflict. This was of course very challenging times for the congregation. The possibility for meeting new people disappeared when the choir was gone. Tensions were high, people were leaving, and the new senior pastor was indeed considering his calling to ministry. If things went on like this much longer, the church would die, so the leaders of the church had to decide for the church to live or die. This was a defining moment.

The new senior pastor cast a vision for the upcoming years and the congregation engaged enthusiastically with this vision - the next day the associate pastor (former senior pastor) called in sick and never came back to the ministry.

For the next few years, the congregation followed the vision and new ministries evolved around gospel music. Eight people from the gospel choir stayed and started the gospel choir Nardus afresh with new people. The gospel music and other contemporary music influenced the services and new people began to show up. The music ministries expanded into three different gospel choirs, where a lot of new people became attracted to the church. Growth in membership was considerable and a lot of new people in the church challenged the church in its own understanding of the meaning of being a church for the city of Odense.

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After a couple of years, the vision was fulfilled. Who would have thought so? The church has experienced a lot of blessings from God. We have seen that God can bring life into something that was nearly dead and make it flourish.

In 2008, people who attended the church or one of its ministries was encouraged to participate in a discernment process towards a new vision for the Church. We used an entire season in the church to focus on dreaming and discerning what God had in mind for this church. Everyone, even neighbors who were not members but normally attended on Christmas Eve was invited to dream along. A vision blog was made on the Internet and this was open to all, also people who didn't attend church were dreaming. It was a happy day at charge conference 2009, when the congregation approved the Vision 2015 and it is now what we are striving for. The Vision 2015 is guiding all the decisions made and we are happy to say that again it feels like a dream has come true.

Today, the church is well known and respected for its music and contemporary services where a clear message of God's love can be heard and experienced. A lot of people consider the church as their church. Some become members and others attend services, sing gospel or help out without ever feeling the need for membership. In the church, there is room for people of all kinds of observation. People are welcomed just as they are. The church is proud to be the church of the people, who consider it to be their church.

The words from Acts on the ways of the first church has been normative for the journey towards a new church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate

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together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2, 42-47)

Today, the church is a new church with a lot of new people.