

BULGARIA AND ROMANIA UNIT

Bulgaria and Romania Unit is a small unit. Organized women's work was resumed in Bulgaria (after a break of nearly 50 years) about 25 years ago and made its first steps in Romania about 5 years ago. The United Methodist Church in both countries is a minority church and it comes under one Annual Conference. Being a minority church means that it is very difficult for Methodists to make a powerful impact on life and policy in both countries. Most of the congregations are relatively small and their respective women's groups are also small. They are situated at great distances from each other. Financially all congregations and their members are struggling to survive and are heavily dependent on outside financial support. The limitation of church funds and personal financial means does not allow travelling, thus limiting activities predominantly to a local level. The small number of women in each local group also limits the scale of the work. Having in mind all this the Women's Committee worked out a long-term strategy which proved to be successful.

Work is carried out on the following levels:

1. Annual Conference level.

The Committee organizes an Annual Seminar each year. Some 50 women are invited to attend, the invitation being sent to all women leaders including one or several extra women from the various churches, including women from Romania. The Seminar is bilingual. We encourage the pastors and the women groups' leaders to send not only older women but also younger ones, being different each year if possible. The Seminar serves as a training tool and as an encouragement. The themes are practical as well as addressing our Methodist identity ("I am the Way, the Truth and the Life", "You Have Anointed My Head, My Cup Is Overflowing", "Do Not Be Afraid, Only Believe", "I Was Lost but Now I Am Found", "Forgiveness", etc.). Lecturers are predominantly among the Methodist women. Participants are expected to pass on what they have learned to the women in their regions, organizing the respective Regional Seminars and delivering the lectures. To help them out each group is provided with a copy of all lectures.

The Annual Seminar closes with a worship service on Sunday morning with the local congregation where the Seminar is being held. Since the Unit President, Rev. Margarita Todorova, is an ordained elder she always preaches and presides the Holy Communion either on her own or together with the local pastor.

2. Regional level.

Regional Seminars are held once a year. The aim of the Seminars is the theme of the Annual Seminars to reach as many women as possible as well as to help women in the respective church circuits to build a close relationship. Members of the Committee attending a Regional Seminar observe the respective "lecturers" and estimate their skills. In this way the Committee searches for capable women who could be more actively involved also on Annual Seminars level.

At the Seminars on both levels women exchange ideas and share their experiences. All of them value the time they spend together in fellowship.

3. Local level.

Work is carried out on local level. Our women take seriously the theme of the Federation's quinquennium "Chosen People: Called to Proclaim". They meet to study the Bible and share their faith which helps them to build confidence to be able to share their faith in the community. They are also involved in social action on a limited scale – work among Roma children, orphans, the sick, the elderly, building up close relationships with each other.

4. **Work on an International level**

a) **Central Conference level:** Five women attend the Central Conference women's Seminar which is held once in 4 years and the Unit President with another member of the Committee attends the Women Consultation held also once in 4 years. The aim of these meetings is encouragement and sharing ideas and strategies.

b) **International partnerships:** On a Central Conference level a partnership is formed between the Bulgarian women and the Austrian women. A partnership was formed also between the Bulgarian women and the women from the Southampton District of the British Unit. The aim of these partnerships is mutual support and encouragement, building up relationships and sharing of ideas and strategies. Our British sisters sponsored the distribution of Bibles (in Bulgaria and Romania) and the translation, printing and distribution of study materials in Bulgaria as well as the publishing of a daily devotional "Chest of Jewels" (in Romanian and English) written by Ligia Istrate and 3 other Romanian women.

c) **Women's World Prayer Day:** Every year the materials of the World Prayer Day are diligently translated and distributed. Methodist women are always actively involved in its celebration. In some places they are joined by women from other denominations but in other places they may be the only ones initiating and celebrating the event.

d) **World Federation:** For the members of such a small unit, limited in travelling, being part of a big worldwide family is very important. Since it is not possible for a larger group to meet together again in order to celebrate the World Federation Study Day and since it is so important for all of us to keep connected with the World Federation one of the sessions during the Annual Seminar is always dedicated to the World Federation Study Day.

5. **Training and study materials**

In order to equip the women for the work they do the Committee has carried out a Leadership Training Programme. Now they are picking various study materials, translating them, printing them out and providing each group with a copy. During the Annual Seminar a training session has been provided to train the women leaders how to use them. These materials have been appreciated by the local pastors as well.

6. **Appreciation**

We have been privileged to witness God's blessings in all we do. He has allowed us to see the fruit of our labour. We are witnessing the maturing of our women and the seriousness with which they approach and carry out the work. Their faithfulness in organizing the Regional Seminars has helped for the building up of closer relationships among the congregations in the respective circuits. Often these events remain the only ones carried out on a regional level. The work we do and all the efforts we put into it is highly appreciated by the leadership of the Annual Conference and the Bishop. We have their full support in everything we do.

7. **Concerns**

On 4 May the three major parties in the Bulgarian Parliament introduced changes to the Law on Religion. The proposed changes include banning funding and financial support from abroad to the religious organizations. The state will provide financial support only to the Orthodox Church and to the Muslims. Only the Orthodox Church and the Muslims will have the right to open theological training schools and Universities. No training from abroad will be acknowledged without a special recognition of the state. Only people with a theological training approved by the state will be allowed to serve in a priestly position. If this proposal passes the Methodist Church will be badly hit – pastors' salaries, the running costs of the churches, various church projects, the women's Annual Seminars, the translation and distribution of materials are heavily dependent on funding from abroad. Please pray for us so that these proposed changes will fail.