

Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of The United Methodist Church

We see a worldwide United Methodist Church driven to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To live more fully into this vision, we are working toward deeper connections throughout the church, greater local authority, and more equitable sharing of power and representation around the world.

The UMC Today

The United Methodist Church is a connectional church serving Christ on four continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America) in more than 40 countries. Each church belongs to a district, each district belongs to an annual conference, and each annual conference belongs to an episcopal area. In the United States, episcopal areas belong to Jurisdictions. Outside the United States the Episcopal Areas belong to Central Conferences. The General Church includes the worldwide church and is governed by a General Conference which meets for 10-12 days once every four years. The Constitution, doctrinal standards and laws of the church are published in *The Book of Discipline*.

Historical Background

Throughout the twentieth century The United Methodist Church and its predecessor bodies struggled with the issue of how to be a global church that at once honors the universal nature of the whole church as the body of Christ, the local circumstances of regional churches, and the uniquely connectional nature of the people called United Methodist. Historic recommendations leading up to the 2008 General Conference are as follows.

- 1920s: Central conferences were created. Several central conferences were granted the ability elect their own bishop. A commission on central conferences was created in the Methodist Episcopal Church. By 1932 the Methodist churches in Korea, Mexico, and Brazil became independent ('self-headed') Methodist churches.
- 1932: The Commission on Central Conferences suggested three possible directions for the future: 1) Central Conferences could be developed into independent Methodist churches; 2) the United States could be formed as a Central Conference, and a new, smaller, fully representational General Conference be created to deal with global issues; 3) in continuance with the status quo, all non-U.S. based churches would be Central Conferences. General Conference would continue to deal primarily with U.S. issues, but also global issues. Nothing was done.
- 1939: Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal, South and Methodist Protestant Churches unite to form The Methodist Church. Jurisdictions are created in the United States.
- 1944: Creation of the Commission on the Structure of Methodism Overseas (COSMOS).
- 1964: General Conference mandates that COSMOS study the church's structure and make recommendations. Five Central Conferences request and receive autonomy.
- 1968: The Methodist Church unites with the Evangelical United Brethren to form The United Methodist Church.
- 1968: COSMOS offered four directions for the global structure, particularly recommending options #3 and #4. 1) Make minor GC legislative changes, no major changes; 2) urge autonomy for non U.S. based regions; 3) create a world church with regional conferences, each responsible for its own *Discipline*, and an international General Conference

- confined to international issues; 4) create a World Council of Methodist Churches consisting of autonomous regional churches meeting for consultative purposes. Given the overwhelming issues occupying the 1968 GC on the merging of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church, no action was taken on these proposals, which effectively meant adoption of #1.
- 1972: COSMOS recommended its own discontinuance, and the creation of a Committee of Central Conferences in its place. Small modifications were made to the structure of the church.
- 1992: General Conference asked the Council of Bishops to study the global nature of the church.
- 1996: The Council of Bishops reported to the GC, recommending: 1) in place of General Conference, a Global Conference constituted by one clergy and one lay member from each Annual Conference, meeting every four, five, or eight years, as deemed appropriate; 2) creation of a Global Mission Council to be a consultative forum for focusing, visioning, initiating, and coordinating the mission task of The UMC; 3) creation of four regions, including North America, Africa, Asia/Philippines, and Europe, each with authority over its own finances, its own internal structure, and various regional issues; 4) global leadership to be provided by the Council of Bishops. General Conference appoints a Connectional Process Team (CPT) to further develop the proposals.
- 2000: The CPT recommends to General Conference the creation of four regional Central Conferences, including North America, to focus on the organizational agendas and issues of each region. It also proposed a quadrennial global Conference with a base membership of 500 to confirm regional election of bishops, legislate on church doctrine and constitution, celebrate global mission and ministry, and address social issues of global importance. Each of the regional bodies would be authorized to create its own program agencies. The proposal is defeated.
- 2004: General Conference creates The Connectional Table to “serve as a steward of the vision and resources for the church’s mission and ministry.” Its first function is to provide a forum for the understanding and implementation of the vision, mission, and ministries of the global church.”
- 2008: General Conference resolves that the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table jointly appoint a Study Committee of twenty to report to the 2012 GC with possible legislation altering *The Book of Discipline* so that the United States would be one Regional Conference among others within the worldwide United Methodist Church. General Conference also recommends creation of Regional Conferences across the church, replacing Central Conferences. The United States Regional Conference would retain its jurisdictional structure. These constitutional amendments were sent to the Annual Conferences for ratification but were not approved.
- 2010: The Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of The United Methodist Church seeks to involve as many people as possible in thinking about how to best serve God worldwide. Input from these conversations will guide the Study Committee’s deliberations and recommendations to the 2012 General Conference.