

WORLDWIDE MINISTRY THROUGH THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*An Interim Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church
Council of Bishops and The Connectional Table
Spring, 2007*

THE WORLD-WIDE MISSION OF THE UMC

The global dimensions of The United Methodist Church have resulted from the strong missionary outreach of its predecessor denominations. Faithfulness to the Wesleyan interpretation of the gospel imperative to share the joy of salvation in Christ and to become agents of that saving grace in serving neighbors through programs of personal and social development has manifested itself in a church implanted on five continents...

The challenge has always been, and remains today, learning how to accommodate or enable the witness of this global community of faith within the connectional spirit and structure of Methodism.¹

We believe God needs a church that is more fully ready for world-wide mission and ministry. United Methodism, because of its missionary thrust and connectional nature, could play a leading role among Protestant churches in the 21st century in modeling a new way of being church in the world.

The world is changing. People move more often from one country to another. Many nations are more interdependent socially, economically, politically and spiritually than ever before. Many are connected by new means of digital communication. In that changing context (described variously as globalization, interdependence, or digital revolution) where the world is becoming more closely connected and interdependent, we believe that the missional witness of the disciples of Jesus Christ should also be appropriately connected and interdependent.

In short, The United Methodist Church should live into its world-wide nature more fully. We choose to use the word “worldwide” to describe the nature of United Methodism. “Worldwide” differs from “global” as it has been used in the discussion of recent decades. Referring to the world is wider and more appropriate than to the globe. The Church’s mission is to the world, not to the globe. “World”, theologically, is more than a geographic term: it is God’s blessed creation, God’s adversary in its fallen state, the object of God’s love and salvation through Christ and reconciliation.

¹ “A Global United Methodist Church: Some Benchmarks or Historical Antecedents”. A paper prepared by Robert Harman for The Connectional Table, April 27-May 1, 2006.

WHY NOW?

The urgency is in attempting to answer our call as Christians to live differently in the world, to offer the world a better version of unity and interdependence, in short to be a counter culture. Recent developments in world Christianity call for a new emphasis on a concept of mission that addresses a world community and would not be impeded by national, cultural and economic barriers. A renewed conversation was initiated during the 2004-2008 quadrennium as a result of: 1) new mission initiatives, missional cooperation and church growth, especially in Africa, 2) new initiatives by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, 3) the possibility of the congregations in the Philippines seeking greater relationship with other Methodist churches in Asia and therefore considering autonomy, and 4) the establishing by the 2004 General Conference of a Consultation to Study the Relationship between the Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean and The United Methodist Church.

While we celebrate the worldwide nature of our ministry as United Methodists, we confess that too often we fail to operate as the body of Christ as described in 1 Corinthians 12. As with secular society, economic and political power in the denomination rests in the United States. A look at the *Book of Resolutions* provides proof of the predominance of U.S.-centric issues at general conference. We know that cultures outside of the United States are just as complex, yet the legislation does not reflect the complexity. Why?

U.S. dominance in denominational governance damages both the church in the United States and in central conferences. It disempowers central conferences from being fully actualized within the body and allows the church in the United States to escape responsibility from dealing with its internal issues. To be whole is to take responsibility for all that God gives us and to value the unique gifts that God spreads among God's people. To be whole is to value all. Our structures must reflect this value and prompt us to ever-greater degrees of responsibility for reflecting God's reign in the church and the world.

THE UMC'S CONNECTIONAL-NATURE

The United Methodist Church is connectional. We are one church serving the cause of Christ in over thirty-eight countries. We are connected by common doctrine, common mission and common discipline. We make decisions through a single General Conference with regional and local decisions made in Jurisdictional, Central, Annual, District and Charge Conferences. Our *Book of Discipline* states these missional decisions and processes for us.

The work of the current Task Group proceeds from our understanding of our United Methodist identity. United Methodism, through its connectional nature, is - by its very essence - truly catholic. As a "catholic" movement, it cannot be confined by nation, country, continent, race or class, but transcends such borderlines and pertains to the whole world. It is this world to which John Wesley refers in his famous dictum "I look upon the whole world as my parish." Coined in a controversy about the right to evangelize, Wesley's universal proclamation of Good News to all persons violated canonical principles of parish rights in his time. Wesley was convinced that

the universal task of spreading the gospel must not be hindered. He would not recognize any limits.

At the same time The United Methodist Church lives in ecumenical relationships. Our connectional nature as well as our Constitution commits us to this self-understanding and to our efforts to work for greater unity in Christ's Church. Our involvement in the ecumenical family might be described in a series of overlapping circles, showing those "family ties" moving from closest to more distant relationships.

Circle 1—The United Methodist Church—all bodies subject to The UMC's General Conference (our nuclear family)

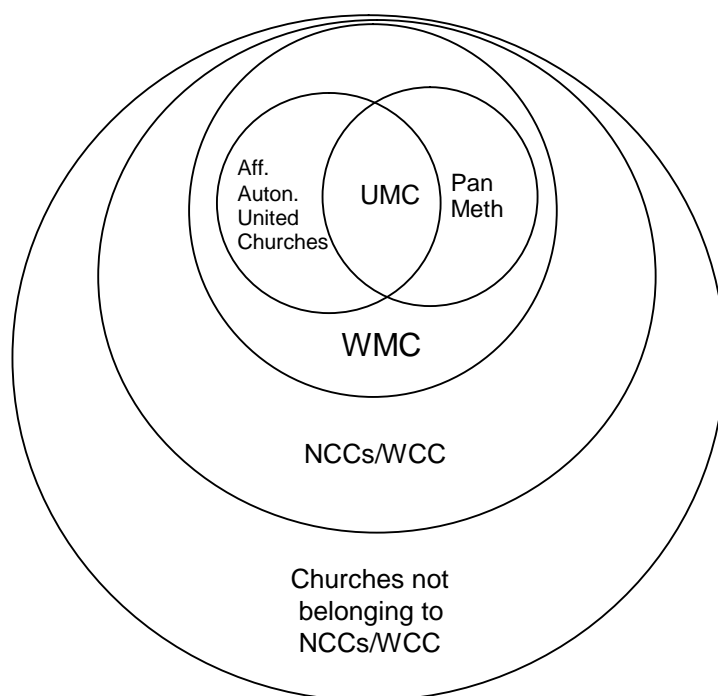
Circle 2—Affiliated Autonomous and Affiliated United Churches (our extended family)

Circle 3—Churches who belong to the Pan Methodist Commission (our cousins)

Circle 4—Churches who belong to the World Methodist Council (our extended tribal family)

Circle 5—Churches who belong to various national councils of churches and the World Council of Churches. (participants in reunions of related families)

Circle 6—Churches who do not belong to national councils or the World Council of Churches (distant cousins, aunts and uncles)



Family Ties of The United Methodist Church

All of these relationships are important and need to be strengthened. At the same time, the conversation about the world-wide nature of The United Methodist Church and how we appropriately live more fully in that reality is important and deserves our attention as well.

INTENT OF THIS LEGISLATION

The Task Group proposes that the following legislation as a first step toward living more fully into the world-wide nature that already exists in our church in a limited way. It does two things:

- Makes four constitutional changes allowing a future General Conference to create structures for regional and jurisdictional conferences that are the same everywhere the United Methodist Church is in ministry.
- Provides for continued study and a report to the 2012 General Conference by the Connectional Table and Council of Bishops.

The proposed legislation does not do any of the following:

- It does not change the number, purpose or function of Jurisdictional Conferences

- It does not change the way bishops are elected or assigned
- It does not change the purpose, number or scope of any general agency
- It does not change the size or power of General Conference
- It does not change the way the Social Principles are decided upon or amended.
- It does not change the way money is apportioned or allocated.

LEGISLATION

We propose that the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table separately send the following five petitions to the 2008 General Conference:

- Petition 1
Amend ¶ 10 by deletion of a few words:
~~There shall be central conferences for the church outside the United States of America~~ and, if necessary, provisional central conferences, all with such powers, duties and privileges as are hereinafter set forth.
- Petition 2
Amend ¶ 28 by deletion of a few words:
There shall be central conferences for the work of the Church ~~outside the United States of America~~ with such duties, powers and privileges as are hereinafter set forth. ~~The number and boundaries of the central conferences shall be determined by the Uniting Conference. Subsequently~~ The General Conference shall have authority to change the number and boundaries of central conferences. The central conferences shall have the duties, powers and privileges hereinafter set forth.
- Petition 3
Amend ¶ 31.2 by addition of a few words
2. In those central conferences where there are no jurisdictional conferences, To elect bishops for the respective central conferences in number as may be determined from time to time, upon a basis fixed by the General Conference, and to cooperate in carrying out such plans for the support of their bishops as may be determined by the General Conference. In those central conferences where there are jurisdictional conferences, bishops shall be elected by the respective jurisdictional conference.
- Petition 4
Amend ¶ 48 by addition and deletion of a few words
The bishops of each jurisdictional and central conference shall constitute a College of Bishops. In Central Conferences where there are Jurisdictional Conferences, the Jurisdictional Colleges shall arrange the plan of episcopal supervision of the annual conferences, missionary conferences and missions within their jurisdictions. In Central Conferences where there are no Jurisdictional Conferences, the Central Conference ~~and such~~ College of Bishops shall arrange the plan of episcopal supervision of the annual conferences, missionary conferences, and missions within their respective territories.

- Petition 5

Enabling Resolution for Further Study

Resolved: That the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table jointly continue their study of how to lead the United Methodist Church to reflect its worldwide nature and explore how the *Book of Discipline* might be altered so that the United States would be one Central Conference while maintaining the current jurisdictions. Cost for this study will be borne by the Episcopal Fund and the General Administration Fund. It should be guided by the following principles:

A. General Conference and US Central Conference

1. The General Conference would meet for one week with the same number of delegates as currently elected apportioned in the same way as now done.
2. Following the meeting of the General Conference, the US delegates to General Conference would meet as the US Central Conference to conduct its business.
3. General Conference will always meet prior to any and all Central Conferences.
4. While this arrangement could continue indefinitely, each body could decide to meet at a separate time and place. However, for reasons of cost and the long-range plans already made for General Conferences in the near future, it is envisioned that back-to-back meetings will be held in the United States for the first two quadrennia after passage.

B. Powers of the General Conference

Essentially, the power of the General Conference will remain the same. It will have authority over the following:²

1. Constitution
2. Doctrinal Standards, Doctrinal History, Doctrinal Heritage and Our Theological Task
3. Mission Statements and Global Mission Initiatives
4. Social Principles
5. Resolutions on Global Issues
6. Clergy Orders
7. Episcopacy. The Council of Bishops remains the Council for the whole church.
8. Financial Matters regarding the following funds: World Service, Episcopal, Interdenominational Cooperation, and General Administration, and Africa University. All Annual Conferences in the connection will be apportioned their share of support for these five funds using a similar formula as presently employed. GCFA remains a Council for the whole church.
9. Administrative Order defined or delegated.
10. Judicial order for global matters. The Judicial Council remains a general church body elected at General Conference.

²This list is a revised version of one proposed in "A Report on the Global Nature of the United Methodist Church" from the Council of Bishops to the 1996 General Conference, *Advance Daily Christian Advocate*, volume 1, p. 172.

11. Ecumenical relationships with other denominations, world communions and interreligious groups.
 12. Definition of and requirements for church membership defined or delegated.
- C. General Agencies
All General Agencies remain as agencies for the whole church as they currently are. It is expected that they will continue to adapt as they more fully live into the global nature of their mission.

RATIONALE FOR THE LEGISLATION

General Conference should be able to create similar structures for all of our world-wide church. Each Annual Conference, should belong to a Central Conference which should be able to organize sub-units called Jurisdictional Conferences. Further study is needed to explore how to live more fully into our world-wide nature.

Respectfully,

Bishop Ann B. Sherer, Chair
Bishop Scott Jones
Bishop Ruediger Minor

Kristina Gonzalez
Forbes Matonga
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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the past 40 years, the Council of Bishops as well as other groups have studied, listened, and sought legislation that would allow our church to live with integrity in our many manifestations around the world. Each conversation has brought new insight and hope. The following historical reviews and “working papers” of the task group are examples of the denomination’s attention to this central matter.

I. OUR THEOLOGY AT WORK

The work of the current Task Group proceeds from our understanding of our United Methodist identity. United Methodism, through its connectional nature, is - by its very essence - truly catholic. As a “catholic” movement, it cannot be confined by nation, country, continent, race or class, but transcends such borderlines and pertains to the whole world. As a worldwide church, United Methodism proves its “Catholic ubiquity”³.

In the recent discussion on the “global nature” of the United Methodist Church, points have been made about numbers of adherents and geographical distribution to decide, whether United Methodism is a worldwide church or not. The attempt has been made to locate the place of United Methodism in a typology of church structures in comparison to churches of other traditions, labeling the United Methodist Church as an “Extended-National Confessional” church, a US denomination with some outposts on other continents. Instead of seeking to be a “global United Methodist Church”, recommendation is made to participate in World Methodist endeavors and contacts with Concordat, Autonomous and Affiliated churches as well as involvement in global Christianity through the Ecumenical movement⁴. While all these endeavors have their merits and are helpful in the process of clarification of United Methodism’s role and mission in our world today, they almost completely fail to consider the polity of United Methodism. In this way, they look at results and outside criteria and activities to determine the nature of United Methodism. We choose rather go in the opposite direction, showing that worldwide outreach and distribution flow from United Methodism’s “catholic” nature, which is distinctively expressed in the connectional system. While not denying the necessity and benefits of United Methodist participation in cooperation with other Methodist and World church bodies, it is our goal to demonstrate United Methodism’s inherent Catholicity.

We choose to use the word “worldwide” to describe the nature of United Methodism. “Worldwide” differs from “global” as it has been used in the discussion of recent decades. For many, the word “global” is problematic, tainted and blessed by the present process of “globalization”. Global United Methodism could be seen as part of a world trend, characterized by homogenization and dominance of Western economy and culture. “Worldwide” Methodism existed, and the word has been used, for many decades before “global” became fashionable.

³ See the classic definition of Catholicism by Vincent of Lerins: “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all” (“ubique, semper, ab omnibus”).

⁴ The most comprehensive overview of this discussion in Bruce W. Robbins: *A World Parish?*, Nashville, Abingdon 2004, and the subsequent discussion.

Referring to the *world* is wider and more appropriate than to the *globe*. The Church's mission is to the world, not to the globe. "World", theologically, is more than a geographic term: it is God's blessed creation, God's adversary in its fallen state, the object of God's love and salvation through Christ and reconciliation.

It is this world, to which John Wesley refers in his famous dictum "I look upon the whole world as my parish." It was coined in a controversy about the right to evangelize. Wesley's universal proclamation of Good News to all persons violated canonical principles of parish rights in his time. Wesley was convinced that the universal task of spreading the gospel must not be hindered. He would not recognize any limits. For this he used the term "catholic". While he was at odds with Roman Catholicism – as usual in his time for an English churchman with an evangelical zeal – he declared and maintained his catholicity. More specifically, he derived his right to evangelize from his ordination "to defend the Catholic faith"⁵. He remained a faithful member of the Church of England to his death, but he clearly saw her limitations as a national church⁶ and he practiced a faith that went beyond her boundaries⁷. His spirit and his relationship with other people grew towards a wider fellowship than the ecclesial structures of his time⁸. The best known document of his principles and his attitude is the sermon "Catholic Spirit"⁹. Wesley imprinted on his followers as "fundamental principle... an anti-sectarian and Catholic spirit"¹⁰. It has been noticed that the organizational pattern of the Methodist movement, too, follows catholic principles.

A look at the "Methodist Connection" gives proof of this. This peculiar system of organization that grew out of the Methodist movement, first (and still) known in England as "Connexion", describes the interdependence of persons, congregations, conferences and agencies on a variety of levels. In Methodist vernacular it has become synonymous for "Church", and it "remains one of the greatest contributions made by Wesley to ecclesial polity"¹¹. Though it would be interesting to look at United Methodist ecclesiology from the guiding principle of Connectionalism¹², we will concentrate on its catholic characteristics. Frank Baker describes "the

⁵ "I was not appointed to any congregation at all; but was ordained as a member of the 'College of Divines' (so our statutes express it,) 'founded to overturn all heresies, and defend the Catholic faith.'" Wesley's Works ed. Jackson, vol. VIII, p. 117.

⁶ The idea of a national church is "a mere political institution" - Minutes, 1747 Conference; see Frank Baker: John Wesley and the Church of England, London, Epworth Press 1970, p. 113.

⁷ In his famous "world parish" letter to James Hervey, Wesley wrote about his principles: "'If you ask on what principle, then, I acted; it was this: 'A desire to be a Christian; and a conviction that whatever I judge conducive thereto, that I am bound to do; wherever I judge I can best answer this end, thither it is my duty to go. On this principle I set out for America; on this, I visited the Moravian Church; and on the same am I ready now (God being my helper) to go to Abyssinia or China, or whithersoever it shall please God, by this conviction, to call me.'" Quoted in his Journal, see Works ed. Jackson vol. I, p. 200s.

⁸ "For thirty years last past, I have 'gradually put on a more catholic spirit', finding more and more tenderness for those who differed from me." Works, ed. Jackson vol. IX, p. 55.

⁹ The Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial Edition, vol. II, Nashville, Abingdon 1985, pp. 79 ss.

¹⁰ From "The Life of the Rev. John Wesley" in: Works, ed. Jackson, vol. V, p. 551.

¹¹ Frank Baker in: A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, London, Epworth 1965, p. 230.

¹² To this author's knowledge, a comprehensive presentation of United Methodist ecclesiology is still lacking, though most desirable. The usual discussion, whether the UMC is a church or a movement (as recently shown by the discussion of the "Johnson Case" and its treatment by the Judicial Council), could be overcome by a serious treatment of the connectional principle of a church that, built on mutual interrelationships, maintains its character as a movement, lest it becomes a "dead sect" – to use Mr. Wesley's words.

general pattern of the connexional system” as a “society ... subdivided into classes ... with lay leaders, who assured the flow of inspiration and information between the individual members..., supervised by lay itinerant preachers; a network of itinerant preachers moving from society to society throughout the nation. ... The itinerant system linked Methodism into a living unity, a ‘connexion’... The Established Church was a national machine... The Methodist societies were much more a national body.”¹³ What Baker describes here is obviously a movement; however its organizational principle was the “Connexion, which in many ways admirably displayed the traditional Catholic ideal of strong and authoritative Church government, effectually exercised over the whole constituency of the faithful, and uniting them into one body.”¹⁴ As a unified body in “Anglican” England, “Catholic” Ireland and “Reformed” Scotland, it overcame traditional confessional divisions, representing the Catholicity of the undivided Church. This even goes beyond traditional Western Christianity, representing Eastern Orthodox principles as well. “Those realizing [Wesley’s] strong ties with the primitive Greek tradition might suggest that Methodism was a new attempt at creating a Pilgrim community of the Holy Spirit, dedicated to *Sobornost*, ‘a community distinguished by unity in freedom and creating out of many races and nations the family of the redeemed’”.¹⁵ “Sobornost” is the translation of “Catholicity” in the Slavic Orthodox churches, e. g. the Nicene Creed. In view of the similarity of “Connection” with “Catholicity” and “Sobornost”, Methodists could well translate the “marks of the Church” in the Nicene Creed: I believe in one holy connectional and apostolic Church.

From its very early time this connection was international, though on both sides of the Atlantic under the British crown. American Independence was a decisive moment for the coherence of the Connection. We do not need to rehearse the steps that led to the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church at the 1784 Christmas Conference. John Wesley’s famous letter, however, needs to be read carefully in light of the accompanying actions. He states the full freedom of the “American Brethren ... both from the State and from the English hierarchy”. Therefore, “They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church”.¹⁶ Wesley released them from obedience to the crown and the bishops. He did not release them from obedience to the Methodist connectional discipline. To the contrary, “follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church” for Wesley and all Methodists meant: follow the Methodist way. To make this unmistakably clear, he sent a few more documents as appendices to that letter: a creed (The Articles of Faith), a liturgy (The Sunday Service) and a Discipline (The Large Minutes). There was no need to explicitly enforce Mr. Wesley’s authority among his “sons (sic) in the gospel”. It was undisputed, as he had explained it, for example at the 1769 Conference: “I am under God the centre of union to all our traveling as well as local preachers”.¹⁷ (The more he was surprised and shocked, as later the American Methodists did not follow his sentiments concerning the office of bishops.) But even in laying the foundation for what was to become a separate church, we see the

¹³ John Wesley and the Church of England, p. 114

¹⁴ John Lawson in: A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, p. 198

¹⁵ Frank Baker, op. cit. p. 117, quoting Brian Frost, Orthodoxy and Methodism

¹⁶ „As our American Brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.” – The Letters of John Wesley, Standard Edition, London, Epworth 1931, vol. VII, p. 238s.

¹⁷ quoted by Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, p. 205.

“catholic” Wesley at work. His editing¹⁸ of both the Articles of Faith as well as the Book of Common Prayer carefully removed all specific references to the governing authorities in English church and society, making both documents more universal in spirit and language.

Unhindered by national sentiment and traditions, the Methodist Connection could grow throughout the North American continent over the 19th century – and beyond this continent. Its structure (Conferences etc.) and policy became a model for other groups and communities, even those with a less coherent polity. To the contrary, in England, Methodism returned to more traditional and particular national models of church organization. “The Methodist Connexion increasingly gravitated towards ‘the Dissenting interest’, and in the 19th century assumed a natural place among the Nonconformists”¹⁹. Methodists in Britain and the US never ceased in the noble duty, defined by John Wesley for all Methodists “to proclaim the good tidings of salvation”. They both did it at home and abroad. They differed, however, in the way they dealt with their grown up “children”. In the mid-19th century, English Methodism started to release foreign missions into national independency and autonomy²⁰, while American Methodists started with new forms of episcopal oversight for “overseas” parts of the Connection²¹. This and other measures (e. g. the creation of Central Conferences, various international programs and studies, agencies with representation from all parts of the worldwide church) were “an expression of the structural principle that areas outside the US are not mere colonies of the American church but fully qualified parts of the church that design their own rules according to their conditions of life, however within the framework of the common constitution... While English Methodism looks upon national autonomy in the different countries and, therefore, renounces organic union, American Methodism on its part seeks to build up the idea of federation, more and more granting responsibility of self-administration to the church in various continents and countries but maintaining the organic union of the worldwide Methodist Episcopal Church”²².

The strong spiritual and organizational ties of the church in the US with its parts on other continents found an expression in shared oversight over “the Connection at large”. Other components were close cooperation and visits between the various parts of Methodism. Methodism was nurturing a sense of connectedness to the whole world – Methodists and others were experiencing a worldwide church.

There are numerous examples to this day: the Mission Initiatives of the General Board of Global Ministries, which started in 1991 with the “Russia Initiative” and provide “hands on” experiences of the worldwide connection of the United Methodist Church even for local

¹⁸ It should be remembered that Wesley’s editorial work was as clearly expressing his ideas as his writings as an author.

¹⁹ John Lawson in: A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, p. 209.

²⁰ the first being France in 1852 – see Brian E. Beck, British Methodist History and Perspectives on Relations with Churches of Other Nations, in: The Ecumenical Implications of the Discussions of The Global Nature of the United Methodist Church, New York, GCCUIC 1999, p. 190.

²¹ Election of a first “missionary bishop” for Liberia 1856 – Patrick Streiff, according to Harry Wescott Worley: The Central Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church. A Study in Ecclesiastical Adaptation, or A Contribution of the Mission Field to the Development of Church Organization. Foochow China, Christian Herald Mission Press, 1940, p. 57.

²² John L. Nuelsen: Die letzten Schritte zur Selbständigkeit der Bischöflichen Methodistenkirche in Deutschland, Bremen 1936, p. 7 – translation R. Minor.

churches and individuals; partnership programs between Annual Conferences and Episcopal areas on different continents; and international gatherings and convocations of youth, students, women, men and clergy. All are expressions of the connectional structure of United Methodism and communicate an experience of the true catholic church, share in its mission, bridge the gaps and divisions in the human family and pave the way for the world community of all Christian believers.

We are a church with a distinctive theological heritage, but that heritage is lived out in a global (worldwide) community, resulting in understandings of our faith enriched by indigenous experiences and manners of expression...

We affirm the contributions that United Methodists of varying ethnic, language, cultural, and national groups make to one another, and to our Church as a whole. We celebrate our shared commitment to clear theological understanding and vital missional expression...

United Methodists as a diverse people continue to strive for consensus in understanding the gospel. In our diversity, we are held together by a shared inheritance and a common desire to participate in the creative and redemptive activity of God...

Our task is to articulate our vision in a way that will draw us together as a people in mission...

In the name of Jesus Christ we are called to work within our diversity while exercising patience and forbearance with one another...²³

II. BEGINNING DIRECTIONS FOR OUR TIME (a working paper)

A strong and clear word of gratitude must be extended to the General Board of Global Ministries. The Board has been a major contributor in the building of relationships and ministry around the world. While once only the General Board of Global Ministries had members on its board of directors from beyond the United States, today nearly all general boards and agencies do. The Board has provided staff and resources around the world to assist in maintaining our connection.

Annual conferences, congregations and yes, even individuals, have increasingly built direct relationships with one another across the world. Volunteers in mission, partner congregations, visiting faculty opportunities, disaster response, and pulpit exchanges all expand knowledge and care for one another.

Yet despite our many studies, debates, consultations and conversations, if we look closely at our predominant practice, we find the United Methodist Church still operates from a consciousness that places the church in the United States central to denominational life, much like the consciousness that led to the naming of conferences outside of the United States as “central,” central meaning emanating from the United States.

²³ **The 2004 United Methodist Book of Discipline**, *Our Theological Task*, Para. 104, pp. 83-84. 104, pp. 83-34.

Some might say that this is appropriate given that the majority of members and financial resources are “centered” in the United States. Still others might name this moment as a “crucial” moment in the life of the denomination as we consider our relationships with one another. Perhaps God is calling us yet to reflect more deeply on John Wesley’s formative statement, “I look upon the world as my parish.”

While we are called as United Methodist Christians to right relationship in the world—inside and outside of our structure—our actions do not consistently reflect our highest and best hopes. As Bishop Clarence Carr, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, stated skeptically during the Service of Repentance and Reconciliation at General Conference 2000, “For what you do speaks so loud I cannot hear what you say.”²⁴

Much work remains to be done.

- 1) This conversation must be expanded and deepened. Written responses will be requested from leaders in all of the Affiliated Autonomous Churches. Conversations will be sought wherever members of the task force and leaders of these churches can get together.
- 2) We hope that a broader conversation will develop within the United Methodist Church to support greater understanding and dialogue surrounding the theology, history and recommendations contained in this paper in and amongst the congregations and conferences across the connection.

The Task Group invites the United Methodist Church to ponder the following questions:

- If we are a worldwide church by theology, how completely do we live our theology?
- How shall we order our life together as United Methodists on many continents so as to honor the contributions of all?
- Will we give equal weight to what is on the hearts and minds of all who gather in holy conferencing?
- Are United Methodists in the United States willing to address issues of power, trust, control, and fear— both within itself as well as in its relationships with those beyond its borders?
- Will the church in the United States address the matter of “privilege” that accrues to it via money and membership?
- Will we disseminate information in a manner that honors differences in language and culture, especially in our decision-making processes?

The United Methodist Church is changing and becoming. Living as a worldwide church we are invited to remember the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth: “Power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

III. SOME BRIEF HISTORY OF EARLIER CONVERSATIONS

²⁴ Proceeding of the 2000 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, Daily Edition Vol. 4 No. 5, Thursday morning May 4, 2000, pg 1926.

Since 1964, there have been numerous studies, task groups, and legislative attempts to clarify the worldwide nature of The United Methodist Church. What follows is a brief summary from the records of the General Conferences since that date.

A. 1964: COMMISSION ON STRUCTURE OF METHODISM OVERSEAS (COSMOS)
Quadrennial Study Paper

- No one type of organization is ideal under all circumstances.
- In the maturation and growth of overseas Methodist churches, two basic principles are apparent: (1) **the principle of freedom** (allows a church to decide what patterns of church life will contribute most to its vitality and outer witness) and (2) **the principle of fellowship** (ability to recognize its oneness with other churches and to maintain it with bonds for mutual enrichment and for carrying out the mission of the Church to the world).
- Recognized that affiliated autonomous Methodist Churches have provided an answer in particular areas and that some Central Conferences may wish to consider this as a possible structure for the future.
- Mindful of the fact that the Central Conference may continue to have an important place in certain areas and recommended that each Central Conference study its future carefully so that the greatest opportunity for freedom and fellowship may be realized.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION: The primary recommendation was that during the 1964-68 quadrennium the Commission on the Structure of Methodism Overseas be authorized to carry out a major study of the needs of episcopal administration in the Central Conferences of the Methodist Church and make its recommendations to the 1968 General Conference.

In the words of Bishop Streiff ("The Global Nature of the United Methodist Church," 2003, p.2), COSMOS "proposed that all parts of the Methodist Church outside the US consider to become autonomous. These autonomous Methodist churches could then decide whether they would like to remain in an affiliation with the mother church in the US or unite with other churches in their countries."

B. 1992: THE GLOBAL NATURE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Petition
from the Council of Bishops

The Petition set forth the need to:

- Develop a truly global Church
- Provide for equity (parity) between Central Conferences and Jurisdictional Conferences
- Provide for connectional unity with flexibility and freedom for meeting regional needs
- Redefine some General Conference responsibilities as regional ones
- Develop sensitivity to how God seeks to manifest the Gospel in each unique culture and nation
- Maintain a vital global connection in order to prevent both narrow parochialism and detrimental regionalism

RECOMMENDATION: That the General Conference authorize the Council of Bishops, in cooperation with the General Council on Ministries, the General Council on Finance and Administration, and the Commission on Central Conference Affairs, to continue to develop this proposal on the Global Nature of The United Methodist Church and to report to the General Conference, 1996.

C. 1992: PROGRESS REPORT TO THE 1992 GENERAL CONFERENCE FROM THE COMMITTEE TO STUDY THE GLOBAL NATURE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS, THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The report set forth the following:

- A belief that the time is right to consider new ways of relating within the United Methodist Church that will keep the mission of Jesus Christ at its center, allow greater flexibility and creativity, strengthen Methodist fellowship around the world, and become an occasion for a new expression of spiritual energy (Among other background statements, the report recognized four important values of United Methodists: (1) locality, (2) globality, (3) connectionality, and (4) inclusiveness.)
- Principles and polity issues which guided their thinking are the same as those stated in the 1992 petition
- A vision for the future which continues to emphasize common dignity and respect, creative freedom and flexibility, connection of global membership through common global ministries, and sensitivity to radically changing cultures

PROPOSAL: Set up an organizational structure for the Church, consisting of General Conference, Regional Conferences (Africa, Europe, Asia, and North America), and Annual Conferences. The Council of Bishops would continue to be a global council related to the General Conference, having spiritual and temporal oversight concerning the whole connection. The parameters and responsibilities of each of the foregoing were delineated.

D. 1996: A REPORT ON THE GLOBAL NATURE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH BY THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

- Become a global Church: “By becoming a global church, the United Methodist Church is only being consistent with its self-understanding, its membership and fellowship, its identity and polity, and its commitment and witness to the Christian faith.”
- The Church is best able to do global mission in a globalizing world rather than from an American perspective.
 - a. It is rather odd for a church of a national identity to do mission in another country for purpose of planting a church there.
 - b. To do global mission requires global visioning and participation, coordination and pooling of resources
 - c. A global world needs a global church
 - d. Follow Wesley’s remark: “I look upon the world as my parish.”
- Acknowledge that both the church and mission are not only global but also local. “*The Church in mission must be acknowledged as free to be responsive, flexible, and creative*”

in expressing locally its life, faith, witness, and service, including the development of structures and agencies for local, national, and regional activity and governance, subject only to the essential limits provided by the faith and Constitution of the United Methodist Church.”

- A global Church should share its resources multi-laterally across the global connection.
- A strengthened ecumenical commitment will grow out of a global church.

PROPOSAL:

1. The study proposed a Global Conference with stipulations for its authoritative parameters, membership operations of Global Conference sessions, and meeting times.
2. The study proposed a Global Mission Council whose purpose would be a global forum for focusing, visioning, initiating, and coordinating the mission task of the UMC. Regional Conferences would have the authority to define their internal structure suitable to the life and mission of the Church in their regions.
3. The petition to General Conference requested that a task force be established to develop further the proposals that address connectionalism and globality.

E. 2000: TRANSFORMATIONAL DIRECTIONS FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

“The 1996 General Conference of the United Methodist Church established the Connectional Process Team to manage, guide and promote a **transformational** direction for the United Methodist Church to continue the work begun by the Connectional Issues Study of the General Council on Ministries and the Global Nature of the Church Study of the Council of Bishops.”

The following transformational directions were recommended:

1. Center on Christian Formation
2. Call Forth Covenant Leadership
3. Empower the Connection for Ministry
4. Strengthen Our Global Connection and Ecumenical Relationships
5. Encourage Doctrinal and Theological Discourse

Growing out of the above broad areas, some of the specific directives were:

- Create parallel Covenant Councils on all levels—local to Global Mission and Ministry--to oversee mission and ministry
 - b. Central Conference Covenant Councils, with the exception of the U.S., will be encouraged but not required
 - c. The Covenant Council for Global Ministry and Mission will serve as a forum for theological discourse that promotes the on-going spiritual formation and discipleship of all members of the church.
- Create a new structure
 - a. Affirm central conferences: The United Methodist Church in the U.S. would be structured as a central conference
 - b. Retain current jurisdictional conferences in the U.S. Central Conference.

- c. Redesign and align the work of general agencies.
- Strengthen the global connection and ecumenical relationships.
 - a. Affirm local flexibility in organization and increase independence for United Methodists to structure ministry within their own context.
 - b. Reconstitute General Conference as United Methodist Global Conference with 500 delegates to meet quadrennially. Each annual and provisional conference would send two delegates (one clergy and one lay); remainder of delegates will be apportioned on the basis of annual conference membership.
 - c. Strengthen global connections among educational institutions
 - d. Explore relationships with autonomous and affiliated churches.

A resolution. “Living Into the Future” referred the Connectional Process report and the Bishops’ Global Nature report to the General Council on Ministries for further study and to make recommendations to the 2004 General Conference. The full report was not adopted; however, the five transformational directions were approved.

SELECTED READINGS

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