



# Discerning God's Will

Patricia Farris and Elaine Stanovsky

Church governance should have as its goal discerning the will of God and acting in concert with it. Proportional representation, based either upon membership or attendance is not intended nor designed as a tool of listening for God's will. Proportional representation is not a biblical model. It was not Wesley's vision. It is not even the model of representational government experienced in the United States of America which painstakingly protects the rights of the minority against the tyranny of the majority.

**Proportional representation is not a biblical model.** In the first century Paul described the community of the faithful as a body—the body of Christ—comprised of many diverse, interdependent members. Extending the image, Paul would not have advocated for one member dominating all the other members, nor even for the majority to lord it over the minority within the body. Paul's image urges us to seek to organize ourselves in a way that preserves and harmonizes the diversity of the many members, with special honor and protection for "lesser members."

**Proportional representation is not Wesleyan.** The General Conference and the general agencies of the United Methodist church have grown far beyond anything John Wesley could have imagined. Wesley's vision was originally a fairly intimate familial gathering of all "traveling preachers," intended for mutual accountability,

shared mission, and practical and spiritual support. Today the General Conference has grown into a large complex, multi-lingual, international body with equal numbers of clergy and laity.

A representational model for conferences became necessary when there were simply too many preachers, spread over too large an area for it to be practical to

by encouraging and paying attention to the voices of a wide variety of faithful people from a wide variety of ministry and social settings.

**Proportional representation is not the best of democracy.** American democratic government is designed with careful checks to protect minority interests against the "superior force of an interest-

ed and overbearing majority" (James Madison). The U.S. Congress embodies two principles in its two houses: the House of Representatives, based upon proportional representation, and the Senate, where the representation of the various states is equalized, regardless of their popula-

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tion. This principle ensures that the particularity of local interests is protected against the weight of the majority. The balance in the American democratic system, encourages diversity, and stimulates health and creativity. It allows a variety of local experiments to take place in different places at the same time. Some of these will fail. Others will succeed. In the end, the whole nation will be stronger because everyone will benefit from the learning derived from these experiments.

Translating to the United Methodist Church, the degree to which we are able to encourage and embrace the diversity within our body, is the degree to which we open ourselves to hearing most fully and accurately the Word of God for our time.

gather them all together. While the "formula" for representation at General Conference has been frequently in flux, it has been characteristic of the people called Methodist to listen for the voices on the margins and to rest uneasy until new, emerging voices are included in decision-making. So, representation in the conferences and the general agencies has expanded to include laity, women, ethnic groups, young people, older adults, as well as the geographical and cultural diversity of the church.

The call for proportional representation in the decision-making of the church is part of an effort to limit theological inquiry, and racial and ethnic diversity. It is a movement away from our heritage of listening for God's will

We are a Church in search of gospel Unity. United Methodists sometimes find it difficult to articulate the faith that we hold in common. We do not always recognize one another as true members of the household of faith. Different ones of us apply different litmus tests to separate the genuine Wesleyan sheep from the errant goats. And, depending upon how wide or narrow we believe the gate is, we either welcome diversity, or we protect doctrinal purity.

The unity we seek is not uniformity. Unity achieved by the majority exercising control over a minority is not gospel unity, but coercion. We follow Paul, in

search of unity that honors and protects the fragile members of the body. The Church is most fully the body of Christ when the full variety of members is present. **It may be the quiet voice of one on the margin that will speak the prophetic voice God intends us to hear.**

Within the United States, the Western Jurisdiction has brought far more ethnic, age and gender diversity in its delegations to recent General Conferences, its agency membership elections and its episcopal elections than any other Jurisdiction in the U.S. Do we imagine that God is not at work in this fact? The West has lower membership than other regions of the

church, though it has a higher percentage of clergy to laity than other regions. It is impossible to calculate how the Western Jurisdiction would compare to the rest of the church in the U.S.A. if participants in new and expanding ethnic and language ministries were included in the membership statistics.

The principle of proportional representation has already been used to reduce the representation from regions of the church with smaller memberships. This principle, combined with an over-all reduction in the membership of general agencies, already means that many Annual Conferences have no representation on some agencies of the church.

To make membership a larger factor in determining the voices at the tables of decision-making would be to deny the church the rich gifts God gives it in its diversity. Scripture, tradition, reason and experience suggest that the whole church should protect these voices as precious members, necessary to the strength of the whole body, and crucial to our discernment of God's will for our life and mission. □



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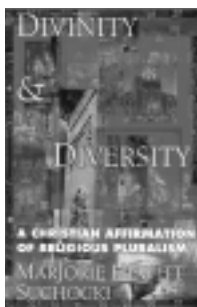
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