



Leading the Church Through Troubled Waters

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Methodist episcopacy was created out of the Christmas Conference of 1784 for the sake of mission—an instrument to lead the Church in spreading scriptural holiness and reforming the continent, as well as providing sacramental pastoral leadership for the American Church. When Asbury refused to accept Wesley’s appointment as “general superintendent” for America and turned to the conference of preachers, Asbury and the American Methodists created a totally new style of episcopacy, one accountable to conference and born out of the need for leading the Church’s mission in a new land. As Bishop Matthews described this new entity: “We are not prelates on the one hand nor diocesan officers on the other. We exist for the connection, and are a kind of cement uniting the whole denomination.”

The words describing the work of Methodist Episcopacy in ¶414 (2000 BOD) are active verbs—to lead, to strengthen, to guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim, to travel, to provide, to promote, to ensure. The *Discipline* is clear: Missional leadership is the corporate work of the COB. It is the Council—not just each individual bishop—that is mandated to provide spiritual and temporal leadership for the whole Church. This clarity was placed in the constitution in 1939 (¶45), re-emphasized in 1968 with the EUB Church accepting the essence of historic Methodist Episcopacy, and further articulated by General Conference in 1996 with ¶427 stating unequivocally that

new bishops are members of the Council before being assigned to jurisdictions, and that the Council is in sacred covenant to provide servant leadership for the whole Church. Episcopal oversight cannot be separated from the Council, and the Council is far more than the sum of its members. It is an organic reality constantly reshaping itself and being reshaped to meet the

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needs of the Church.

To quote Dr. James E. Kirby, “The story of the episcopacy in American Methodism has been one of evolution and change in response to the various challenges that have confronted its mission.”

Various studies have been authorized by General Conference to consider needed re-shaping of the episcopacy. Paralleling (and often a part of) these studies have been recommendations from the COB itself to clarify and strengthen its corporate leadership role.

In 1968, the COB submitted to General Conference a constitutional amendment calling for a “set aside”

Secretary of the COB, an active bishop who would be released from presiding over an area to be an “operations officer” of the Council. The proposed constitutional amendment passed General Conference and was approved by Annual Conferences with 80% aggregate vote. However, in the midst of the matters of union, it did not appear to be recorded and therefore had to go back to the 1970 special session of General Conference for implementation, where it did not receive the required 2/3 vote.

Bishop Jack Tuell presented a proposal to the Council in 1989 calling for General Conference to act on a constitutional amendment for a “presiding bishop” of the Church, a “set aside” bishop who would give leadership to the Council and to the Church in a structure much like the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The

proposal was defeated in the COB after much debate. The conclusion was that a “presiding bishop” of the Church was not within our polity.

Yet there continues to be a growing concern that while the COB is well-organized to lead itself, the Church needs more continuity of leadership from the Council.

This reality surfaced in a 2001 survey of the COB conducted by the Council Life and Work Committee. The question was asked: “Does the COB need more continuity of its leadership in order to more effectively lead the Church?” The answer was overwhelmingly “yes!” Bishops stated a number of reasons:

The changing shape of the COB. In 1939, at Union, there were 20 active bishops and 20 retired bishops in the new COB. Today there are 50 American active bishops, 18 Central Conference active bishops, and 76 retired bishops who have voice but not vote in the COB.

The growing responsibilities of bishops. More and more responsibilities are placed upon the COB, including spiritual shepherding of more than 10 million global members with approximately 43,000 congregations, 126 colleges and universities, and some \$40 billion worth of property and an annual income of \$5 billion; the assignment of General Conference studies; agendas of boards and agencies; requests for resolutions; pastoral letters; and global concerns, including relating to the growing Central Conferences; and multiplying ecumenical and interreligious relationships. Yet the COB has only a part-time assistant to the Secretary for staff, a person dealing only with minutes, agendas, and meeting arrangements. A retired bishop also serves as a very part-time assistant.

The drift toward “localized” episcopacy. Some would say that bishops are moving away from being itinerant general superintendents and are becoming “diocesan bishops.” Annual Conference responsibilities are more time-consuming. Issues of litigation, clergy needs, local church appointments, General Church promotion, and interpretation consume more and more of a bishop’s time.

Out of these, and many more concerns within and outside of the COB, a task force on leadership was appointed in 2001. After much study and conversation, the following leadership proposal was presented in the fall 2002 COB meeting and overwhelmingly adopted by written ballot:

- four-year set aside president, who would be free from area responsibilities
- permanent office of the COB staffed by a full-time administrative assistant
- process of electing the president with no jurisdiction naming more than one president before all six jurisdictions have had a president elected from their college.

In order to enable this leadership structure, the COB, after intensive study and research, decided to ask General Conference to amend ¶407.3, which currently allows the COB to “set aside” a bishop for up to two years for a special assignment. Since the principle is already

in place (and has been exercised by the COB), it was decided that this route would be the way to proceed. Two paragraphs of the constitution are relevant to the COB’s position:

¶45: The focus of the work of general superintendency is the COB. It is the COB which is given the leadership task of planning and carrying out the spiritual and temporal oversight of the entire Church. Over many decades the complexities of oversight have increased substantially and appropriately in response to increasing responsibilities. However, the support structure for doing the work of general superintendency has remained virtually the same as it was at the time of the reunion of Methodism in 1939, and indeed, as it was in the predecessor denominations extending back into the 19th century. That is, the COB carries out its responsibilities almost entirely through the very part-time service of its own members.

¶47: Gives further support to the possibility of a bishop serving in an assignment other than “residential and presidential supervision.”

“A bishop may be assigned by the Council of Bishops for presidential service *or other temporary service* (italics mine) in another jurisdiction....” This explicit constitutional authority to assign a bishop to service other than residential and presidential is very clear. It appears to give the COB the necessary constitutional authority to elect and assign a bishop to serve as president of the COB for a temporary period of four years.

The Council asked the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision on its proposed amendment to ¶407.3. The case was argued before the Judicial Council at its spring 2003 meeting. Decision 961 rendered the request “unconstitutional,” arguing that ¶47 limited the episcopal office to both “presidential and residential” responsibilities in a jurisdictional or Central conference.

The introductory paragraph of the conclusion of the COB’s brief to the Judicial Council still serves as a clarion call for the COB to create a leadership structure more focused on the current needs of the Church and the world: “The Council of Bishops is committed to making the general superintendency as effective as possible, for the sake of the mission of Christ in the world. The increasing demands and expectations of the Council of Bishops by

the Church call for a restructure to provide much greater continuity and intensity of leadership by the whole Council of Bishops.”

While the proposed constitutional amendment was declared unconstitutional, the need was clearly stated.

As the “troubled waters” of the Church become even more turbulent, the calls for the COB to provide stronger leadership become louder and more widespread. Will our connection grow weaker or stronger? What will be the shape of our global structure? Can our boards and agencies be brought into a cooperative instrument of common mission? How do we relate to our ecumenical partners? How do we speak a prophetic word to our culture, give leadership and clarity to our mission, mediate conflict, and teach the apostolic faith?

The COB is the only body authorized by our *Discipline* to be a leadership rudder giving global stability and direction to United Methodism. The Council is in a period of transition as it seeks to provide a model of servant leadership that gives more continuity to the office of President and provides more administrative staff to a Council of 144 members dispersed around the globe.

Historians of American Methodism, Kirby, Richey, and Rowe have written in *The Methodists*: “In Episcopal hands, we suggest lies the future of the connection. More than any other office, the bishops have emblemed and defended the itinerant principle, appointive authority, and connective system....” (p.55)

The Council of Bishops is called to be the guardians of the apostolic faith and tradition and the spiritual and temporal leaders of the connection in its mission. The Council seeks within its own life and structure ways to provide the Church with faithful and effective leadership. With God’s guidance, and the support of General Conference and, indeed, the whole Church, we can and will. □



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