



Preparing for Pittsburgh

William H. Willimon

To prepare for Pittsburgh, I asked members of my Delegation to list their concerns for the 2004 General Conference. A few of them mentioned specific legislation—simplification of the hodge-podge that has become (thanks to the 2000 General Conference!) our ordination process, granting local pastors the right to vote on General and Jurisdictional Conference delegates, exclusively lay election of Conference Lay Leaders, and so forth. Most of us were concerned about three areas of our church's life.

1 There is fatigue over our unproductive and terribly divisive debate on homosexuality. We are not ready to move in any constructive way on this issue. I pray for a sort of moratorium on this debate, out of love for our church. I wish that proponents of liberalization of our strictures against homosexual practice would be patient and continue the laborious process of educating and persuading fellow Christians that our continually reaffirmed stand is wrong, rather than to short circuit that process with legislation. I wish that opponents of change in our current policies would not clog the legislative committees with all sorts of restrictive, heavy-handed legislation in a church that is already overly legislated and under led. **Both sides are attempting to do, through coercive legislation, what only persuasion and patient conversation can do.** In a church that has lost two million members in a couple of decades, how could this be the most pressing issue facing our church? We all need to pray for more light on this subject, as well as for the ability to discern which issues are of greatest importance. Forgive me for listing this issue first.

2 Financial shortfalls will necessitate difficult choices. I predicted the current crisis would hit us in 2000. I was wrong; it has hit us now. Membership losses are taking a toll on our ability to raise money for the mission of the church. For instance, expenses for a bishop currently run about \$1.2 million per quadrennium. With a shrinking Episcopal Reserve Fund, used in the past to make up shortfall, we could be asked for a huge increase to fund our bishops. Ought the number of bishops to be reduced? I would like to see this General Conference put Africa University on a more secure financial footing through apportionments, yet with payments to World Service coming in at less than 89%, we face some tough decisions. I was pleased to hear that at last the costly general church structure was to be revised to make it more efficient and less costly. But from what I hear of the proposed "Living Into the Future" plan with its "Connectional Table," I

fear it is more of the old—too large, too expensive, and unrepresentative. Having one member at the table from each Annual Conference only perpetuates the inequities that exist when larger Annual Conferences are underrepresented. The plan mandates quotas at the "Connectional Table" to ensure ethnic diversity when, from what I hear in our current debates, our deepest divisions are due to a lack of theological, rather than racial, diversity. I could go on about the problems at this "Table." **All of us at General Conference must cultivate a mood of crisis and concern for the financial plight of our church, the shrinkage of funds for mission and benevolence, and the costly administrative structures that take resources away from where they ought to be expended.** The church is called to be in mission, to join Christ's work in the world, not to be having meetings and feeding administrative machinery.

3 There is widespread concern, particularly among our laity, about the perceived inability of our bishops to hold one another accountable, particularly in areas of doctrine, and the reluctance of our clergy to insist that our fellow clergy adhere to the standards set forth in our *Discipline*. As one layperson put it, "What's the use of debate and voting at General Conference if a bishop or pastor says, 'personal conscience is above church law'?" I don't know that many of our leaders have said that our disciplinary standards are irrelevant, but the perception is there among many of our people. Bishops are called, in great part, to "guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim...the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition....to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically" (Para. 414.3). If our laity feel that UM clergy are not holding one another accountable, our system is in jeopardy because our system puts a huge amount of trust in the ability of clergy to care for and to supervise clergy. I could be wrong on any of this, so I'm trying to keep an open mind, trying to read the mountain of material that I'll be receiving, and counting on meeting Jesus in bodily form in Pittsburgh. □



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