

# “Conferencing” at General Conference

Jack M. Tuell

The General Conference is a unique blend of Wesleyan “conferencing” with the political ideals of the New World’s “representative democracy.”

“Conferencing” with Wesley meant spiritual and practical questions, answers, and dialogue. Its goal was more personal (providing spiritual undergirding for the preachers to face the hard tasks of the year ahead)—than it was legislative or strategic (plotting the direction of the movement). Wesley reserved the latter for himself!

In America, early conferences under Asbury continued much the same pattern. But two forces were at work: first, a burgeoning of democratic philosophy resulting in several conflicts and defections in the 1790’s and early 1800’s; and second the rapid growth in numbers of members and annual conferences, culminating in the creation of the first delegated General Conference in 1812.

The history of the General Conference from that date until the present has been one of the growing ascendancy of the “representative democracy” motif at the expense of the Wesleyan “conferencing” motif. This has been the cause of some concern, and the last two General Conferences (Denver and Cleveland) have seen efforts by some (including the Council of Bishops) to re-introduce more of the “conferencing” elements. The hope of this has been to reduce the feeling that the General Conference is just another version of the United States Congress with all of its partisan blocs and apparent service of special interests, and to remind all delegates and participants that we are stewards of God on behalf of God’s Church—that we “have this treasure.”

When I travel to Pittsburgh in April to the General Conference, it will be a little *déjà vu*, for it was in April of 1964—exactly 40 years ago—that I came as a delegate to my first General Conference—in Pittsburgh! The big issue then was the Central Jurisdiction, and we heard eloquent pleas and observed peaceful demonstrations on the floor of the Conference. The whole experience awakened me to the immense and exciting potential of our Church to proclaim the Gospel and to make disciples.



Now it is 2004, and the coming General Conference is facing equally daunting issues as those faced 40 years ago. Should this gathering be looked upon as a great and holy opportunity for witness and mission—or as a setting for disaster and division? I believe that the answer may depend on the extent to which the delegates are open to “conferencing” as a significant part of why they are there. By “conferencing” I mean listening to others, being quiet with others,

praying with others, sharing ideas and concerns with others, learning with and from others, respecting and understanding others—yes, truly loving others. It is remembering that when we meet together as the General Conference, we are still CHURCH.

This does not mean that the delegates are excused from *legislating*, even if they might like to be. The Constitution requires

them to make corporate decisions, and this is what legislation is all about. Opinions and convictions need to be vigorously expressed. Proposals need to be approached with intellectual rigor as well as compassionate understanding. Conferencing should not be seen as a sentimental and mushy substitute for making hard decisions, but as an indispensable aid in making those decisions.

The agenda of the General Conference is set by its petitioners: General Boards and Agencies, annual conferences, districts, local Church Councils, Sunday School classes, or individual United Methodists. Each petition (over 1200 have been filed) will be considered and acted upon. In order to accomplish this in a 10-day period, the General Conference divides itself into ten legislative

committees, each of which in turn divides itself as needed into subcommittees and sometimes sub-subcommittees.

So at the heart of the General Conference is a scene repeated in scores of locations around the building where the General Conference is meeting—a sub-subcommittee, a group of 8 or 10 delegates, seated in a circle of battered folding chairs in some noisy corner, to give first consideration to a group of 5 or 10 petitions which have been assigned to them. *It is in this mundane setting that a petition often lives or dies.* It is for this reason

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that delegates need to be especially alert, receptive to one another and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They should be slow to dismiss an idea because it is “different,” but in the spirit of “conferencing” should spend the time to hear from one another and from God. The temptation is strong, especially under the pressure of time, to quickly adopt (or more likely, dismiss) a proposal on the grounds of a facile “institutional wisdom.”

As a proposal moves its way from this sub-subcommittee to a subcommittee to the Legislative Committee to the plenary session of the General Conference, delegates need to act in the spirit of “conferencing” at all levels, ever open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is not easy for delegates weary from working 14 to 16-hour days under multiple stresses. But surely this is what God calls us to do.

Is the General Conference the best way for a global denomination to determine its policy and direction? Other denominations have popes; some have two legislative bodies—a “house” of elected clergy and laity and a “house” of bishops; some rely on a “Council of Twelve Apostles.” But we are tied historically and constitutionally to a system which combines Wesley’s “conferencing” with a representative democracy system growing out of the Enlightenment and the United States Constitution. How can we make it work in this year of our Lord 2004?

1. Truly believe that God can work and act through the General Conference (even when the vote is 497-496!)
2. Incorporate Wesleyan “conferencing” into the deliberations at all levels of the General Conference, with all that means in terms of listening, praying, silence, sharing, and being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. Honor and respect dissent, remembering Wesley’s admonitions on this subject in his “Plain Account of Christian Perfection” and elsewhere.
4. Help to insure that all of the General Conference is infused with prayer.

The framers of the United States Constitution envisioned two legislative bodies which would be “deliberative assemblies,” each of which would reason together, actually learning something from their colleagues, toward the goal of arriving at a wise consensus in the form of enacted laws. What has happened to

## General Conference Prayer Ministry

A group of United Methodists from Western Pennsylvania plans to saturate General Conference in prayer. The General Conference Prayer Ministry Team has a clear agenda. Not a political agenda, but a prayer agenda.

The team’s website, [www.gcprayerministry.org](http://www.gcprayerministry.org), explains how every individual and every United Methodist church can join in covering General Conference in prayer.

The vision of the GC Prayer Ministry Team is to enlist a massive prayer effort before and during General Conference. The website includes a strategy and information on:

- Praying Methodists—every person setting time aside weekly to fast and pray.
- Prayer Vigils—Every United Methodist church participating in a prayer vigil preceding and during General Conference.
- Prayer Delegates—people who will come to Pittsburgh (April 27-May 7) specifically to pray “onsite with insight.”
- GC Prayer Room—a ballroom at the site of General Conference will be transformed into a Prayer Room with prayer stations, prayer tents, and a site for daily concerts of prayer.
- Volunteers—a call for people to host, transport, fast, and help in a variety of ways.

**For more information, go to [www.gcprayerministry.org](http://www.gcprayerministry.org) or call Jan Woodard @ 724-465-5886.**

that grand vision? How long has it been since a senator’s or representative’s mind has been changed as a result of a floor speech a colleague has given, and not because of a promise of “pork” for his/her state or district? I blush for my country when I think of how a nobly conceived representative democracy has too often degenerated to matters of power, politics, and pork.

Is the General Conference immune from such corruption? From the crasser elements, yes; from the more subtle forces, no. These subtle forces operate in all of us—a desire for the approval and esteem of our colleagues being a primary one. What does a delegate do when a vote involves a conflict between this natural desire and what he/she perceives to be the will of God?

It is here that the infusion of “Wesleyan conferencing” into the General Conference can be of immense help. Wesley saw the Conference not just as a decision-making body, but as a *learning experience*. Conference is a place you can *learn* something. In sharing, in the silence, in the worship, in the listening, in the praying, in the understanding, in the loving one another, God comes

through and we are taught holy lessons. And we are empowered to act and vote as God’s servants.

Forty years ago, as a rookie delegate, I thought I knew quite a lot about parliamentary procedure. I challenged Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Jr. on a point of order. He patiently listened to my argument, spoke a few words in defense of his ruling, and the Conference voted about 980 to 10 to sustain him! I learned something at the 1964 General Conference at Pittsburgh!

My hope and prayer is that at the 2004 General Conference all participants will be in a “learning mode” at a much deeper level of our faith and life together. This can happen if “conferencing” in the Wesleyan spirit is truly a significant part of our experience at Pittsburgh. □



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