

# Fewer Bishops?

**Sandra Lackore**

Does our denomination have too many bishops? Are we making promises to support an episcopacy that our children and grandchildren will not be able to afford to keep? Should the size of the episcopacy be tied to our success in making disciples for Christ and through those disciples financing the work of connectional ministry? Legislation before General Conference 2004 puts these issues before delegates for consideration and action.



important things. First, it will connect our mission of making disciples for Christ and connectional stewardship with strategic planning and accountability. Our bishops provide important leadership; however in a denomination built on vital lay ministry, it will take us all to succeed in this effort. Second, by reducing the number of bishops eligible for election, the legislation reduces future increases in the dollars needed to fund the episcopacy while we look for long-term solutions.

Membership has been in decline among the jurisdictional conferences over the last twenty years and further decline is projected through the next quadrennium. Jurisdictional conference membership has fallen from 9,200,000 in 1985 to just over 8,000,000 in 2002 and it is projected to fall significantly below 8,000,000 by 2007.

Add to that these facts. Our membership decline is in the part of the Church that participates in apportionments. Membership growth is in the part of the Church that depends on the resources apportionments provide. Another fact—in spite of increasing local church expenditures and giving, the general church portion of the local church dollar is down, declining from 5 1/2¢ in 1989 to a projected 3 3/4¢ over the next quadrennium.

What does it all mean? It means that we may not be able to afford in the future the infrastructure that the General Conference put in place when jurisdictional conference membership and commitment to fund connectional ministry were increasing. It also means we must be focused on membership and connectional stewardship if we are to reverse trends that signal change in our Wesleyan call to do all the good we can for all the people we can in all the places we can. And, we must be focused on membership and stewardship in ways that are materially different from before in light of the fact our efforts over the last 20 years have yielded no sustainable improvement.

The legislation to change ¶405 being offered by the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) will do two

Under *The Book of Discipline*, GCFA submits to each General Conference budgets for the next quadrennium based on projected receipts. The Council has developed the budgets it is recommending to General Conference in 2004 understanding that membership is declining, participation in apportionments has been disappointing and the costs of operating annual conferences continues to increase. The resulting budgets are conservative and, GCFA believes, fully fundable by annual conferences and local churches.

GCFA's recommended budget for the years 2005 – 2008 is \$585 million, which reflects a 7.3 percent increase over the current quadrennium's \$545.69 million budget. This budget includes a proposed 27% increase in the Episcopal Fund budget taking it from \$65.4 million currently to \$83.37 million next quadrennium. This increase is significantly larger than what is being recommended for any other recipient of general church funds.

The infrastructure of the jurisdictional annual conferences is changing as a result of the decline in membership and connectional stewardship. Since 1987, 30 districts have been eliminated with 11 of them having been eliminated in the last two years. In 1987, we had 73 jurisdictional annual conferences and today we have 63. During this quadrennium, 6 such conferences have merged into 3. Can the infrastructure of our annual conferences change without the episcopacy changing as well?

Jurisdiction	Membership 2002 General Minutes	Pattern of Annual Chg in Membership	No. Eligible for Election		Retiring '04	Net for Election in '04	
			Current	Proposed		Current	Proposed
NEJ	1,530,282	(- 1%) or more	10	9	5	5	4
NCJ	1,574,285	(- 1%) or more	10	9	3	3	2
SEJ	2,938,111	slightly +	14	13	6	6	6 <sup>1</sup>
SCJ	1,821,197	slightly (-)	11	10	4	4	3
WJ	430,558	(- 1%) or more	6	5	2	2	1
Totals	8,294,433		51	46	20	20	16

GCFA has no desire to reduce the number of bishops eligible for election. The important focus of GCFA's legislation is to widely disseminate data so that declining membership trends can be identified early and strategic plans developed to reverse them. The legislation seeks to expand the table of those engaged in understanding and responding to membership declines and downward trends in apportionment participation to include the jurisdictional committees on episcopacy, colleges of bishops, and the Council of Bishops. Ultimately, the legislation seeks to match the episcopal infrastructure with our need and ability to finance it if declines continue. (See chart on p. 15)

What's the immediate effect on the episcopacy if General Conference adopts the proposed changes in ¶405? The 2004 jurisdictional conferences offer a unique opportunity to implement change. Because of the high number of announced, retirements at the end of the quadrennium, each jurisdiction can elect at least one new bishop under the proposed legislation. A comparable number of retirements are not expected in the foreseeable future, which means postponing any change could adversely affect active bishops. If the boundaries of a jurisdictional annual conference were redrawn as a result of changes in ¶405, GCFA would make available up to \$100,000 from the Episcopal Fund to support the resulting consolidation of episcopal offices.

Under the proposed legislation, the number of central conference bishops eligible for election would remain at the cur-

rent levels for the next quadrennium, while plans for bringing Central Conferences into full partnership are developed. (See chart below)

The savings to the Episcopal Fund over the next quadrennium would total approximately \$6.2 million dollars.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there would be a directly related slowing of the growth in the cost of funding future benefit liability for retiring bishops.<sup>4</sup>

The real significance of the proposed legislation is the expectation that each jurisdictional and central conference would develop a strategic plan, including annual and quadrennial goals for increasing connective stewardship and membership within its annual conferences. Accountability would be achieved through progress reports by jurisdictional and central conference committees on episcopacy to the Council of Bishops. Growth would result in future increases in the number of bishops eligible for election and continuing decline would result in a reduction in the number. In the case of a reduction, however, the legislation provides a mechanism for no change in light of missional needs.

It is always risky to talk about growth in membership and the need for more money to do the work of the Church. The risk is being misunderstood as valuing numbers over people. Clearly, individuals whose hearts are on fire for Christ do ministry.

The reality, however, is that their ministry is made available to more people in more places (true to our Wesleyan call) when membership and financial resources are increasing. □

<sup>1</sup> The Southeast Jurisdiction (SEJ) has opted not to elect the 14th bishop it has a right to elect under ¶405 as it is currently written. As a result, the SEJ could elect the same number under the old and new formulas. Even though the SEJ has not elected a 14th bishop, GCFA is Disciplinarily required to include funding for this additional bishop in the budget for the Episcopal Fund each quadrennium; thus, a savings by reducing the number eligible for election.

<sup>2</sup> The membership totals for Central Conferences reflect 2001 data; not all Central Conferences reported membership totals at that time.

<sup>3</sup> The approximate cost of supporting a bishop for a quadrennium totals \$1.2 million.

<sup>4</sup> By 2004 year-end, jurisdictional and central conferences combined will have 96 retired bishops. (Source GCFA database as of October 2003.)



**Sandra Lackore is General Secretary and Treasurer of the General Council on Finance and Administration, Evanston, Illinois.**

## To Learn More

The legislative proposals to revise ¶405 will be included in the *Advance Daily Christian Advocate*, Volume I, and are available now on the GCFA web site at <http://www.gcfa.org/GCFAReports2004.html>.

## #1 Investment Strategy

Want to grow disciples of Jesus Christ? Grow your Sunday School!

Coming in the July/August 2004 Circuit Rider

Africa	Membership <sup>2</sup>	Bishops
Africa	175,480	5
Congo	835,375	3
West Africa	596,995	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,607,850</b>	<b>11</b>
Europe		
Central and Southern Europe	18,771	1
Germany	38,247	1
Northern Europe	17,254	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>74,272</b>	<b>4</b>
Southeast Asia		
Philippines	184,509	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>184,509</b>	<b>3</b>
Total Central Conferences		
	<b>1,866,631</b>	<b>18</b>