



This article is a response to 24 petitions proposing changes to the Constitution of the UMC, sent separately by the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table to the 2008 General Conference. Together these petitions constitute legislation that addresses worldwide ministry through The United Methodist Church in the future. The petitions and supporting documents are available at [www.worldwideumc.org](http://www.worldwideumc.org).

# A Cautionary Word

Tim McClendon

**W**e live in a flat world where technology and communication have facilitated globalization. In such a world United Methodist connectionalism should thrive, but the proposals offered perpetuate inequities between the U.S. and other regions of our denomination. This is a key deficiency in the legislation. Ecumenical issues are another reason these proposals are inadequate. They promote a fragmentation of the denomination that could likely lead to an ipso-facto regional schism making ecumenical dialogue virtually impossible. With which part of the UMC would another faith group converse? Further, the proposals could result in an ecclesiological quagmire. They have the potential to take us to the brink of a polity that most closely resembles the Anglican Communion. Therefore, equity concerns, ecumenical issues, and ecclesiological integrity are clear reasons for General Conference 2008 to reject the proposals.

One could also defeat the proposals on the grounds of process. The request for carte blanche affirmation in changing the constitution in sixty-two places in the twenty-three petitions is difficult to digest. Our polity does not support changing the constitution so that later undefined adaptations can more easily be made. The process for UM constitutional change is established in a manner that demands careful examination with substantive results in mind. It requires a 2/3 vote of the General Conference and a 2/3 vote of the aggregate number of members of annual conferences to change the constitution, a high bar to say the least. Herein lies a serious flaw in the process behind this legislation. If the proposed changes are made, it will only take 50% plus 1 at a future General Conference to change the *Book of Discipline*, with 2012 as the date suggested by the authors. This methodology departs radically from our constitutional form of governance. Changing the constitution elicits too many unknowns without more certitude about future action.

However, the proposals suggest that it is finally time to rectify inequities in our worldwide denomination because we have thoroughly studied the issue. This appears noteworthy, but we need to remember that four decades of previous studies and recommendations garnered little or no support.

In the litany of “Why Now” in the legislation there is less compulsion about actual mission than about what might be called “rhetoric of crisis” over our dwindling numbers; i.e., the apprehension that the Philippine annual conferences will seek autonomy pending their action and that of General Conference. Could our panic over denominational decline be the underlying fear driving some of our discussion about the global nature of the church? A better approach might be to ponder how we can continue to be servants in mutual and missional covenant with those who follow Christ in places outside the U.S.—places where the Spirit is allowing United Methodism to remain a movement more than an institution.

**To be sure, all central conferences are not experiencing growth. Outside the United States, there are only nine countries with UM membership that surpasses 100,000. They are all in Africa. There are only 11 out of 63 conferences outside the U.S. that qualify for more than the two-member minimum of General Conference delegates. Thirty of the non-U.S. conferences have less than 5,000 members. Beyond sub-Saharan Africa and the U.S. our total membership is around 250,000 in 39 conferences located primarily in Europe and the Philippines. This is the reality, so what do we do about it?**

Rather than focusing on the fact that the U.S. church has lost 30% of its membership, why not celebrate those places, especially in other countries, that are brimming with revival? In doing so, we will strengthen a renewed connectionalism that welcomes the shared ministry of the entire UMC. In the vein of

systems-theorist, Edwin Friedman, we need to focus on strength rather than pathology across the church. We have the opportunity to partner with the growing edges of our denomination and learn from one another's effectiveness in making disciples for Christ.

However, the proposed legislation perpetuates old paradigms of U.S. dominance even though it states otherwise. There are many unresolved equity issues. The U.S. will have a regional conference and jurisdictions, while those outside the U.S. will only have regional conferences (cf. Petition 8.2, Petition 24). In the preamble of the enabling petition (cf. Petition 24) it is stated that one impetus for this legislation is the formation of a U.S. Regional Conference, a clear indication of which segment of the church is most important. Petition 24 also delineates guiding principles that don't even include central conferences in the headings: "A. General Conference and U.S. Regional Conference . . . B. Powers of the General Conference . . . C. General Agencies." It causes one to wonder why this document is so U.S.-centric. The hope of church unity and worldwide equity is undermined more than it is undergirded.

Take for example the proposal to keep the Social Principles at the General Conference level. This is also paternalistic and inconsistent with one of the central tenets of the legislation. In the presentation to the Connectional Table it was stated that current General Conference practice unduly subjects our sisters and brothers in the central conferences to U.S. issues that they find offensive even to discuss. The proposals suggest one week of General Conference (cf. Petition 24), but still leaves under its purview the very Social Principles that are cited as a key reason to create regional conferences (cf. Worldwide Nature of the Church—video, [www.worldwideumc.org](http://www.worldwideumc.org)). The logic is flawed.

The final inequity is apparent concerning the election and tenure of bishops. U.S. bishops are elected by jurisdictional conferences and have life tenure (cf. Petition 19). Though general superintendency is protected under the Restrictive Rules (Article III), bishops in the central conferences have term limits. This is another equity issue and probably unconstitutional (cf. Petition 19).

Each of these items borders on outdated paternalism, but the equity issue cuts both ways. There have already been attempts by annual conferences and central conferences to go beyond the boundaries of their ability to adapt the *Book of Discipline* in paragraph 543.7. For instance, there have been challenges to women's ordination (cf. Judicial Decisions 155, 172). If we fragment into separate regional conferences, there are endless possibilities for variations in clergy standards and so much more. We should celebrate rather than undo Judicial Decision 544, which states, "Ordination in The United Methodist Church is not local, nor provincial, but worldwide. While each Annual Conference is a door through which one may enter the ministry of the entire church, the Annual Conference cannot reduce nor avoid stipulations established by the General Conference which must be met by the church's ministry everywhere."

This clarity about minimum ministerial credentials can quickly devolve into uncertainty if it depends upon regional conference interpretation. The proposed legislation calls for "clergy orders," an undefined nebulous phrase, to remain at the General Conference level without specifying which paragraphs or which stances it is addressing. Poor clarity in this matter could threaten our ability to be called "United" Methodists.

We already have problems in terms of ecumenical relationships because we are not recognized as having "apostolic succession" in our ordination. John Wesley was not a bishop and could not ordain, nevertheless as a Methodist Movement no one could argue with the results. Let us be clear. If we do believe in the catholicity of the church, ecumenical relationships under this new proposal may further erode. Certainly, we would have a General Conference, but with so many permutations and adaptations in regional conferences, what we call a "Connection" would be barely recognizable, especially to other Christian communions.

Finally, these proposals represent an ecclesiology that is not consistent with our living tradition. If we are a connectional church, then we need to embrace each other rather than push ourselves apart. Certainly, the phrase "Central Conference" needs to be dropped. It smacks of the racism that was the impetus for the creation of the Central Jurisdiction. Just as that was an example of our connectional polity gone awry, so is this legislation.

The enabling petition (24) introduces a statement that is worthy of careful ecclesiological reflection. It asserts that if this legislation is passed, in the interim from 2008-2012, we will "explore how the *Book of Discipline* might be altered so that the United States would be one Regional Conference while maintaining the current jurisdictions." **The creation of a U.S. Regional Conference appeals to those on the right who want to separate from those more liberal, and to those on the left who might find it easier to advocate for a more inclusive church.**

Either way the specter of schism looms. Depending upon the vote in a separate U.S. Regional Conference on hot-button issues, there is a possibility that more conservative and growing regions of our church might sever all ties with the U.S. church. They could reject our "tainted" monetary support. Sending fewer dollars overseas might be attractive to some in the U.S. who feel that it is inappropriate for central conference delegates to vote on budgets they themselves are barely required to support. However, if our ecclesiology is in concert with the Spirit of Christ, we will embrace a connectional polity that shares collaboratively with the "least of these," and affirm that we in the U.S. need to be informed and inspired by their prophetic voices.

If we become a movement fueled by the Holy Spirit and the message of Christ, we can reshape the world, but if we rush to pass flawed legislation promoting this version of a worldwide church, it is more likely that we may end up becoming a weak confederation of regional conferences. Issues of equity, ecumenical relations, and ecclesiology push me to conclude that we need to work on this far more before making sixty-two constitutional changes. □



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