

A More Genuine Relationship



Minerva Carcaño

A conversation between Minerva Carcaño (MC), Bishop of the Phoenix Area and Chair of the General Conference Study Committee on the Relationship Between the United Methodist and the Autonomous Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Neil Alexander (NA), Publisher of the United Methodist Church.



Neil Alexander

NA: What do you see as the most important or the most challenging recommendations the Study Committee is making to General Conference?

MC: The most important recommendation is that we reconsider how we do mission and ministry together, North and South America and the Caribbean. The challenge is that since the 1930s the Methodist Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean have all become autonomous churches, and we struggle with the concept of mutuality in mission. They moved towards autonomy for a variety of reasons (some from what is now the UMC and others from the Methodist Church in England), but now many are saying that autonomy is contrary to our understanding of the body of Jesus Christ and our commitment to connectionalism as Methodists. While there have been expressions of financial, programmatic and personnel support through the work of the general agencies of the UMC, these efforts have not fully engaged the people who sit in the pews in either the U.S. and Central Conferences or across Latin America and the Caribbean. Now many to the south are asking us to re-establish a more genuine connectional relationship, which calls us to rethink how we do ministry together. I believe this is an opportunity for more effective ministry in the world.

I have been moved on a number of occasions as the committee has gone about its work. I'll never forget a meeting early in the process where I said that we wanted to reconsider our relationships together. A president of one of the national churches in Latin America turned to me and said, "Is this a serious process?" I immediately said yes. And he said, "Well I am having a difficult time believing that it truly is a serious process. I want to know whether, when we say that U.S. foreign policies have undermined our economies in ways detrimental to our families' well-being and that devastate the ability of our churches to be vibrant and rele-

vant, you will go and speak a prophetic word to the U.S. government?" That took me aback, because that was a much deeper challenge and test of faithfulness than the conversation I had anticipated. It did not surprise me that such issues were seen as important, but his emphatic request set high expectations for our conversations. So we are asked by our brothers and sisters to not only be in relationship with them but to also stand with them if necessary against our own national government in those situations where God's justice is not being done.

There was another story from a country that had experienced severe tyranny and oppression, and where some church leaders, including the bishop were detained and tortured for a period of time. The people did not know what was going to happen to them. **But they recall that The United Methodist Church sent an active bishop to be with them for an extended period of time as a witness and a pastoral leader in their midst, as a sign that they were our brothers and sisters. That was in the late 1970s and now they say, "It has been a long time since you have been present with us in that way."**

NA: Do the recommendations going to General Conference basically invite a commitment to shared ministry or do they set forth specific ways we should live in covenant together?

MC: Both. Legislation calls for us to implement the Holistic Strategy for Latin America and Caribbean approved by the 2004 General Conference. We approved similar plans for Latin America and for Africa. But the work related to Latin America and the Caribbean has not been developed. I believe that one of the reasons is that in Latin America and the Caribbean we strive to work with autonomous churches. How to move forward in Africa was clearer because we have established ties with the Central Conferences and their episcopal leaders. So part of the new legislation reaffirms the need to implement the previously approved Holistic Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean.

NA: Is there funding attached to that legislation?

MC: There is only minimal funding, with the expectation that most work will be coordinated with meetings already planned and in which we currently participate. We are sensitive to the financial struggles faced by all of our churches. We want to be good stewards and as creative as possible in finding bold but cost-effective ways to move forward. We are also asking that the Council of Bishops find ways to be more inclusive of bishops and

presidents of the churches of Latin America and the Caribbean. Already there is some progress. On April 22nd and 23rd the Council of Bishops will meet with the bishops and presidents of the autonomous churches who will be attending General Conference. We will spend time in prayer, visioning, and planning together.

We are also asking that Annual Conferences and the thirteen general agencies create specific communication linkages with Latin American and Caribbean churches so that we can share information with and learn from each other.

NA: Do the autonomous churches share a common view about the merits of maintaining their autonomy?

MC: There are certainly churches that say, "We will continue to be autonomous but we want to be in relationship with The United Methodist Church." There are others that are grieving, even after 30 or 40 years, and saying they previously went the route of autonomy because they were told by the Methodist Church in the U.S. that this was their only choice. In some cases, such as Mexico and Cuba, autonomy was required by their own governments. But even now there is United Methodist work in places like Honduras and also ministries in Nicaragua and in El Salvador, that may eventually be defined as United Methodist, or could become mission efforts or even new autonomous churches.

NA: So there are differences in the readiness for specific changes in structures, but an overarching desire to have much closer relationships with The United Methodist Church?

MC: That is a great way to put it, yes.

NA: How will work on all of this be cared for in the next quadrennium?

MC: The hope is that the Council of Bishops and the General Board of Global Ministries will be able to share responsibility for the Holistic Strategy along with leaders of the autonomous churches, but also that all of us will find ways to be in relationship with our brothers and sisters in Latin America and the Caribbean.

NA: Are there misconceptions or misunderstandings that present the biggest roadblocks to progress?

MC: The biggest constraint for United Methodists is in thinking that what our colleagues in Latin America and the Caribbean care most about is money. They need money but they desire much more than that.

NA: Which includes our standing with them in their countries and standing up for them in ours?

MC: Exactly, but they also want to stand with and for us. They have much to share with us from their own faith and theological maturity and their strong witness and mission; gifts that we have missed through our own negligence. One of the of very telling things is that every recent major study of UMC structure has included the need to look at our relationships, yet not one of these studies actually included serious consideration of our relationships with Latin America and the Caribbean.

And we have not yet fully addressed the relationship of Latin America and the Caribbean with the UMC's Central Conferences. For example the Methodist Church of Brazil and Portuguese-speaking UMs in Africa have been collaborating so that United Methodist students from Africa can study at the seminary in Brazil. We need to broaden our thinking about these relationships and all their potential.

Another set of relationships to be taken into account is the relationships with and through the World Methodist Council. At one point in our conversations with leaders of Latin America and the Caribbean, someone referred to the relationship between the UMC and other Methodists as an ecumenical bond. And oh, the response was very, very negative! The leaders from Latin America said, "We of course have ecumenical relationships, but our relationship with you is as members of the same family."

NA: As chair of the study committee, what do you call all of us to reflect on and pray about?

MC: I urge all United Methodist people to pray for and work toward deeper relationship with our brothers and sisters of the Methodist Churches of Latin America and Caribbean so that together we can advance the reign of God among us.

I hope that we continue to send mission teams to Latin America and the Caribbean to be partners in ministry there. But also receive their people in mission to our annual and central conferences of the UMC. There are many places in the U.S. where, for example, it would be beneficial to bring a Spanish-speaking mission team that could help canvas a neighborhood as we decide how to start a Hispanic ministry. United Methodist women could be in dialogue with women from Latin America and the Caribbean around the political issues that are affecting all of our families in the globalized world. Our young people should continue going to other countries in service and mission so that their faith can be enriched by communities of faith in those countries. And we should encourage the exchange of seminary students between Latin America and the Caribbean and the U.S. These and other expressions of unity will enrich both our relationships and our ministries. □

Editor's Note: The complete study committee report is posted on the website of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns at: www.gccuic-umc.org.