

# ANGLES OF VISION

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Who we are affects how we see things. We share a common identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, members of the human family, and United Methodist sisters and brothers. But our life experiences, cultural lenses, and geographical locations make a difference in what we see and in how we understand issues and options. Relationships, the breadth and depth of our knowledge on a host of discrete topics, and the opinions and teaching of others are important in shaping our thoughts and actions.

In the layered and obviously complex subject of our global church, a few of the many provocative questions found in these pages especially grabbed my attention. Some confront prevailing assumptions or cause a search for more information and insights. No doubt different readers will note the absence of concerns they judge even *more* important.

But by all means let's face, pray about, discern, and discuss together the pressing and knotty matters about our life as (United) Methodist member across continents and cultural borderlines.

**1** Is the church's center of gravity for numerical growth and missional vitality shifting from North to South and from West to East while the U.S. continues to exercise disproportionate influence in church governance? Do U.S. UMs fail to acknowledge the prevailing and privileged roles we take in conversations, relationships, and planning for mission within the UMC? How do groups and institutions muster the courage and find the discipline to share and relinquish power?

**2** If most agree that the Central Conferences are no longer mission branches for the U.S. and that the relationship cannot be as one between parents and children, do we need different governing structures and processes? Or, would it be better to think of ourselves as global in terms of mission and relationships but refrain from our usual emphasis on revising formal structures?

**3** In some U.S. and Central Conference settings, clergywomen report a continuing struggle to be heard and honored in male-dominated structures. Meanwhile, U.S. UMs resist the imposition of unwelcome theological and social/cultural norms in our church practice. It is obvious that in honoring local contexts there will sometimes be clashes involving core values. Will we fashion honest and consequential ways to engage each other with the right combinations of respect and resolve?

**4** The Annual Conferences outside the U.S. are often not able to use materials and programs from the general church and must produce what they need in their own settings and languages. They also want to control their own theological

training, such as offering courses that include honoring traditions of teaching that may seem "peculiar" to others. In making room for cultural variations, how big will we construct our tent?

**5** Some in the Central Conferences and autonomous churches believe that U.S. UMs are mostly inclined to support the political, military, and business-oriented policies of their government, which often result in the neglect or harm of people in the Third World. Will we have the adequate will and means to face and work through competing views on such important issues?

**6** Some assert that in the U.S. there is a tendency to accept declining church membership as normal and even to justify it by asserting that numbers are not important. Will the American church want to and be able to learn from regions where the practice is more avidly evangelistic and calls for local congregations to plant new churches?

**7** In the U.S. United Methodists are mostly not poor, and in Asia and Africa UMs are often poor. For many, salvation and redemption have urgent appeal as near-term relief from drought, famine, injustices, and corruption. Local churches reaching out to people in need and across borders are showing the way. How earnestly will we bridge the gaps that divide us and work in ways that make a tangible difference?

**8** Many in the U.S. take exception to Central Conference delegates voting on matters at General Conference that mostly affect the church in the United States. Some Central Conference and autonomous church delegates dislike that so much time is spent on matters of special interest to the U.S. Do U.S. delegates need a separate place and time to attend to American church matters?

A suggestion has been made to form a blue-ribbon commission to examine and draw conclusions about our life together. The idea of having yet another study is enough to make many of us wish for a flat earth so we can jump off the edge! But what if a group that is weighted with a majority of members from the Central Conferences (since presumably when presented to the 2012 General Conference the majority of delegates will be from the U.S.) was given the mandate to provide pragmatic proposals for our polity and practice in grappling with these and other nagging questions? What if the commission was required to report in time for discussion and response in 2011 by *all* annual conferences across the connection and produce a summary report and recommendations for discernment and action in 2012?

At the very least, let's follow the lead of good UM people in every region and kneel for prayers of confession and thanksgiving, and then stand up, roll up our sleeves, and work side by side to proclaim the gospel, build vibrant communities of Jesus' disciples, and do the hard day-by-day work through God's grace of seeking mercy and justice all over the world. □