



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.

Living in New Community

Ann Brookshire Sherer

“The world is my parish.” Since John Wesley spoke these words, persons shaped by Wesleyan theology have been part of a missionary movement.

The United Methodist Church, created in 1968, is an expression of this movement. “We are one church serving the cause of Christ in over thirty-eight countries. We are connected by common doctrine, common mission and common discipline. We make decisions through a single General Conference with regional and local decisions made in Jurisdictional, Central, Annual, District and Charge Conferences. Our *Book of Discipline* states these missional decisions and processes for us.

Our missionary thrust and connectional nature offer us the opportunity to model a new way of being the church in the world. We have a connection that is both worldwide and local. What structure will nurture this connection and witness? How might our conferencing and learning be enhanced? This worldwide movement is seeking the best way to move together into God’s future.

Several parallel events nudge us toward a reconsideration of how we as United Methodists might move forward as a connectional body:

- Church growth, especially in Africa, makes the General Conference more inclusive of the worldwide community and as these delegations grow, the incongruity of General Conference being focused primarily on United States issues becomes more evident.
- The annual conferences in the Philippines are seeking greater relationship with other Methodist churches in Asia and are considering what their relationship with the rest of the United Methodist Church might be. Are there alternatives to both the current pattern and to autonomy?
- The Consultation to Study the Relationship between the Methodist Churches in Latin American and the Caribbean and the United Methodist Church, established in 2004, has revealed a desire to revisit together the best way to structure the relationship among us.
- Early in 2005 the Council of Bishops and the Connectional

Table formed a task force from among its membership to review the conversations and papers of recent decades on the worldwide nature of The United Methodist Church and to consider what next steps might be appropriate. This task force reviewed the COSMOS report, written more than four decades ago, and the reports to General Conference in 1992, 1996, and 2000. It became clear that the United Methodist Church is yearning to find a new way of relating among the varied conferences within the connection.

- In 2006 the Connectional Table met in Bulgaria and engaged in conversation about the history and mission of the central conferences. That same year the Council of Bishops met in Mozambique and, led by African colleagues, engaged in conversation about our mission and life. Understandings among us deepened.

What Does This Legislation Actually Do?

The proposed legislation asks The United Methodist Church to take an important step toward living more fully into the worldwide nature of our connectional church. It makes two substantive constitutional changes through 24 amendments to the Constitution of The United Methodist Church:

To enable a future General Conference to create structures for regional and jurisdictional conferences that are the same everywhere the United Methodist Church is in ministry and

To change the name of “central conference” to “regional conference” in every place it occurs in the Constitution.

The legislation provides for continued study and a report on living in worldwide ministry through The United Methodist Church to the 2012 General Conference by the Connectional Table and Council of Bishops. It makes clear that the General Conference is ready to create within the connection a more equitable, contextually relevant, and mutually strengthening way for the regions of the church to live in unity and to fulfill,

locally and worldwide, our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It makes a decision that declares we want to act in new ways, not just talk.

What Does This Legislation NOT Do?

- It does not change the number, purpose, or function of Jurisdictional Conferences.
- It does not change the purpose, number, or scope of any general agency.
- It does not change the active participation of persons from all regions of the church in any general agency.
- It does not change the way bishops are elected or assigned.
- It does not change the size or power of General Conference.
- It does not change the way the Social Principles are decided upon or amended.
- It does not change the way money is apportioned or allocated.

I believe in this legislation as a path to a more inclusive and equitable United Methodist Church. New conversations could offer the world a better version of unity and interdependence. A new kind of community as envisioned in I Corinthians 12 is our hope. If we live our life unimpeded by national, cultural, and economic barriers, we could be a sign of the new creation that God is offering through Christ to both the church and the world. If we are sensitive to how words hurt and shape thinking, we open ourselves to new kinds of conversations.

Of course, we could choose to wait and keep the status quo, but how long do we in the United States keep our brothers and sisters around the world waiting for us to move beyond a United States-centric church? Could this be the time to risk a different way of living together? There is no one right way forward, but we need a sign that we are committed to living in new community. Acting on this legislation removes constraints to change and commits the United Methodist Church to prayerful, intentional conversation about what it means to be in worldwide ministry through the United Methodist Church. □

NOTE: This article is a summary with extensive quotes and paraphrases from an Interim Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church, Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, Spring, 2007.



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What Led to My Support of This Legislation?

Several learnings and experiences have shaped my own understanding and my support of the legislation that has been sent to General Conference.

Robert Harmon, former Deputy General Secretary of GBGM, speaking to the 2006 Bulgaria gathering of the Connectional Table reminded me “that the Central Conference structure is a ‘mission structure,’ a nineteenth century creation, a vestige of the missionary movement which focused on mission entities being created by missionaries from the United States. Central Conference was a way of talking about the relationship of each area of mission with the “mother” church in the United States. In the 21st century mission is not centered in the United States, rather mission belongs to the whole church and all regions are sending persons and movements out in mission.”

The greatest blessing of my almost sixteen years in the Council of Bishops is the inclusive, worldwide community membership of the Council of Bishops. As we pray, learn, and lead together we

are transformed. This relationship has given me the opportunity to see my residential work and our place in the world, as well as the Council’s work, with radically different eyes. The connection is a gift of God’s grace. We need one another. We understand the gospel more profoundly when we are in conversation and mission together.

The United States is the only region of the church without a regional decision-making structure. Thus we make the General Conference the locus of all the decisions about the United States and ask our colleagues from around the world to spend the majority of our time at General Conference on U.S. issues rather than our common issues. For example almost 80% of the *Book of Resolutions*, 2004 is U.S.-focused. A truly worldwide-focused General Conference would give attention to our common issues. Regional issues would be handled in regional conferences. In every other part of the world there are regional or central conferences.

If a United States regional conference were to meet, I believe we could focus

on the needs of the United States and find more effective ways to address those needs together.

When the Council of Bishops discussed this legislation, every member of the Central Conferences College voted to endorse this legislation. The Central Conference bishops with whom I have talked need a concrete sign that the church is moving toward a new, more inclusive and equitable future.

The name “Central Conferences” reminds many of the race-based Central Jurisdiction that lived in the United States from 1939 until 1968. The Central Conferences College settled on the word “regional” to describe the geographic location of a section of the world.

The possibility of the Methodist Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean and The United Methodist Church shaping a future together exists in a significant new way. I stand on tiptoe to see where this conversation might take us.

— Ann Sherer