

# Toward a United Methodist Representative Church Council: A Concept Paper

by Thomas Kemper

The quadrennial General Conference is composed of an equal number of lay and clergy delegates elected by annual (regional) conferences. It sets policy and program and speaks for The United Methodist Church, yet there is no provision for effective, representative clergy and lay participation in evaluating how or whether the church accomplishes the goals of mission and ministry set by the General Conference, that is, in church governance between general conferences.

The objective of this proposal is the creation of a representative United Methodist Church Council, constituted primarily of clergy and laity, using the structure afforded by the Connectional Table, to work in collaboration

with the Council of Bishops in oversight of the general work of the denomination under the policies and actions of the General Conference.

The *Book of Discipline* provides for a Connectional Table (CT) “where ministry and money are brought to the same table to coordinate the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church” (Par. 901). The CT is further described as “a forum for the understanding and implementation of the vision, mission, and ministries of the global church as determined in consultation with the Council of Bishops and/or the actions of the General Conference” (Par. 905.1). The Discipline gives the CT responsibilities in communications; program coordination, evaluation, and implementation; planning and research; and budget preparation and review (Pars. 905.2-7). It is also assigned a role in the oversight of general agencies. But the CT as constituted is dysfunctional for three primary reasons:

- 1) its general mandates are too theoretical and sweeping;
- 2) its primary practical assignment, the oversight of general agencies, lacks authority or enforcement mechanisms, budgetary control, and follows too closely in the heritage of the failed experiences of the former General Council on Ministries and Program Council; and
- 3) it is too US-centric in composition and self-awareness to creatively and effectively serve a multi-national church with global vision, mission and ministries.

The weakness of the CT and its predecessors leads to an assumption that the Council of Bishops constitutes an ecclesial executive committee between General Conferences, assisted by the Council on Finance and Administration serving as the church’s chief fiscal operative for the several entities charged by General Conference with programmatic and administrative responsibilities. As valuable as these leadership roles are, The United Methodist Church is not an episcopal centered church. Bishops, who do not hold vote in General Conferences, are elders selected for special roles as general superintendents of pastoral ministry and for

collective administration by upholding discipline and order. The episcopal office exists in some branches of Methodism and not in others. As a church of the reformation, we recognize the “ministry of all Christians” with the laity carrying the major responsibility to provide the “primary evangelistic ministry through which all people will come to know Christ and The United Methodist Church will fulfill its mission.” (Par. 127). The laity relates most closely to local clergy who exhort, teach, counsel, and administer the sacraments. Efficient clergy know the pulse of the lay commitment upon which the present and future of the church depends. The voice and energy of the laity and pastoral ministry are too often missing from the evaluation and monitoring of our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

There is both need and possibility in United Methodism for a Lay/Clergy Church Council to bring the perspectives of pew and pulpit to the management of church affairs, acting in concert with the Council of Bishops to assure that the will of the General Conference is carried out and that the voice of pastors and members are always present in the affairs of the church at all levels. Provision for the active engagement of laity is particularly important in light of the emphasis on diverse gifts within the church in I Corinthians 12 and the application of this insight in the strong Protestant emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. This concept enunciated by Martin Luther was notably emphasized by John Wesley in the lay-led Methodist societies of study, service, and Christian discipline.

### **Reconstituting the Connectional Table**

The Connectional Table, a structure already at hand, suggests itself as the basis of a council to bring laity and clergy representation into a significant role in carrying out General Conference mandates, evaluating the accomplishment of ministry goals, and visioning for the future. Eventual revised legislation would be required but the CT’s existing first objective (Par. 904) could stand as the rationale for such a council:

To provide a forum for the understanding and implementation of the vision, mission and ministries of the global church as determined in consultation with the Council of Bishops and/or the action of the General Conference.

Unfortunately, as constituted and populated, the CT lacks the capacity to fulfill this objective, and even less so its second and third objectives:

To enable the flow of information and communication among annual conferences, jurisdictions, central conferences, general agencies, and the Council of Bishops.

Consistent with the actions of the General Conference, to coordinate the program life of the church with the mandates of the gospel, the mission of the church, and the needs of the global community by listening to the expressions of needs, addressing emerging issues, and determining the most effective, cooperative, and efficient way to provide optimum stewardship of ministries, personnel, and resources.

The operations of the current CT focuses primarily on its objectives four through seven, which concern the

review and evaluation of general agencies, a task more easily organized and conceptualized than those of objectives one through three and yet to be proven effective. And this is not surprising given the CT's background.

The CT, as acknowledged, in Par. 902 is the successor to, most immediately, the General Council on Ministries, and originally, The Program Council. The latter was an element in the governance of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and came into The United Methodist Church in 1968 at union with The Methodist Church. In the relatively small, highly centralized EUB Church, the council was a coordinating unit on local, annual conference and general levels. It was intended in the unified context to be a sort of programmatic handmaiden to GCFA. It was carried into the unified context as the "Program Council" and stood first in the agencies delineated under the Administrative Order in the *Book of Discipline*; it was renamed as "The General Council on Ministries" in the 1972 Discipline. GCOM never gained traction in The United Methodist Church and at the 2008 General Conference was discontinued, and replaced by the current CT.

### **New Composition**

While its first objective speaks of the "global church" and its third objective of the "global community," the CT lacks a broadly global membership. It continues from its days as Program Council and GCOM to reflect a US context. Of its current 47 members, only 7 are from outside the US, one person each from the central conferences. The other 21 members chosen through the jurisdictional/central conference system are Americans, five of whom (one per jurisdiction) are based on proportional jurisdictional membership. A large central conference, such as Congo, is capped at one member.

Further, the US-centric nature of the CT is underscored by the inclusion of voting members from five US unofficial United Methodist ethnic caucuses, an attempt to recognize diversity, if in a limited way. And, 10 seats with votes are assigned to the presidents of 9 agencies accountable to the CT; the ecumenical officer of the Council of Bishops, also accountable to CT; and two persons from the Division of Ministries with Young People of the General Board of Discipleship, also accountable to CT. Virtually all of these persons are from the US, as are most of the general secretaries of the 9 general agencies, plus those of the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits and the United Methodist Publishing House, which have voice but no vote in the CT.

The CT currently is overwhelmingly a US entity by composition and scope. It could become more representative of the international nature of the UMC by allocating 44 members in the following manner:

A minimum of one clergy and one lay person from each jurisdiction or central conference, for a total of 24 persons, with 2 additional persons from each jurisdiction or central conference with certified membership over 500,000 or over an initial 250,000 members, up to an aggregate maximum of 25 additional members; ensuring equal representation from clergy and lay, and male and female, and 10 per cent youth and young adult. The presidents of each general agency should have one representative with voice but no vote. The

council would select its own officers.

There will need to be clear and cordial linkage to the Council of Bishops without the Church Council becoming an adjunct of that body. Four places with voice and vote would be reserved for the Council of Bishops, assigned by roles: the president of the Council, the executive officer, and the chair of the Standing Committee on Central Conference Affairs, and the ecumenical/interfaith relations officer. These positions represent salient linkages to the life and work of the Council of Bishops.

### **Responsibilities of a Church Council**

1. To assure that the will of the General Conference on matters of program and polity are conveyed to the annual conferences, congregations, agencies and institutions of the church.
2. Ascertain that the directives and policies of successive General Conferences are initiated and/or achieved within any stipulated time frames.
3. Form a partnership with the COB in addressing pertinent and pressing issues of the day, based upon statements and resolutions of the General Conference.
4. Serve as a partner with the COB in the office of ecumenical and interfaith relations.
5. Assure that the resources of the UMC are used in accordance with the will of the General Conference.
6. Review and gain perspectives on new forms of ministry aimed at making disciples for world transformation.
7. Make reports to the general agencies and commissions on the concerns, enthusiasms and apprehensions within the Connection.
8. Hear from and respond to general agencies' concerns arising from possible duplications of responsibilities, conflicts of interest, and/or initiatives that may seem in order but are not specifically advanced by General Conference action.
9. Act as a forum for discussion of challenges, opportunities, and disagreements arising within the Connection.

Additional relevant questions requiring consideration:

1. Should the current seven CT functions (Par. 905) be replaced by the nine responsibilities above, continued, or interwoven with the nine? Especially, what about current CT responsibilities in monitoring and aligning the activities of general agencies.
2. What role might such a Church Council have in the general budgeting process?
3. What would a Council as described above cost to operate?
4. Could it just be too large to be practical and effective?

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