

Renewal of the Ministry and Structure of The United Methodist Church

A Response to the Report and Petitions from the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church Including Alternative Legislative Recommendations

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the past several years a Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church (henceforth called *Task Group*), established by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table of the UMC, has sought to begin a process for renewing and living more fully into an equitable structure for the people called United Methodists. Those two structures within the denomination are correct in describing the need for reform. The Task Group cites the new mission context, changes within the denomination and the desire to move away from a UMC dominated by “U.S.-centric issues” and structures (such as the domination of English, the pattern of U.S. locations for the most important meetings, etc.). Reports for many decades have called for changes and the general conferences have only been able to respond in minimal ways.

In the Spring 2007, the Task Group presented an interim report including legislation for 2008 General Conference. In Fall, 2008, they amended the legislation and presented it for approval to the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table. Both groups have supported the Task Group’s recommendations. The Task Group’s petitions can be found on the web at www.worldwideumc.org.

Following lengthy conversations with colleagues, the two authors of this document, Okayama and Robbins, chose to submit alternative legislation to General Conference. The purpose of this paper is to describe the reasons and the urgency to present an alternative to the Task Group’s proposal. It is done with reluctance since the authors join the Task Group in advocating for immediate change. However, Robbins and Okayama disagree with the underlying assumptions and pathway chosen by the Task Group. They hope this paper can articulate as clearly as possible the concerns and options that will be present for the 2008 General Conference delegates.

II. CONCERNS WITH THE TASK GROUP PROPOSAL

The need for change in the worldwide structure of the UMC has been apparent in recent general conferences, both in issues surfaced on the floor of the conference (such as a lack of adequate translation) and in reports to the conference. An examination of general conference documents demonstrates the predominance of the United States concerns and voices. The Task Group understands and outlines many of these concerns in their report. The alternative proposal addresses these concerns, and, in addition, seeks to offer an effective means to further unity within the worldwide United Methodist Church.

To begin the renewal process, the Task Group presented 23 petitions calling for constitutional changes, and one petition for continued study with accompanying principles. The goals of the 24 petitions are the following:

- The twenty-three constitutional petitions enable the creation of the United States as a Regional Conference, the shift of name from “Central Conference” to “Regional Conference,” and the maintenance of a structure of jurisdictions only in the United States.
- The enabling, “Petition 24” continues the study by the Bishops and Connectional Table and establishes principles for the meeting of the regional conferences (including the U.S.) and then calls for all powers of General Conference and the general agencies to remain the same as present.

Several concerns emerge from the well-intended legislation presented by the Task Group:

1. The creation of one, U.S. Regional Conference perpetuates and reinforces great inequities within the UMC. At present, one region of the UMC provides the entire, fiscal support for all the other regions of the UMC. Under the present structure, the regions outside the United States are not invited to contribute to the financial support of the whole church through apportioned funding (except that Central Conferences provide some support for their own regional bishops through the Episcopal Fund, see *2004 Book of Discipline*, ¶543.4). It is wrong to revise the structure and NOT to address inequities that are detrimental to all conferences.

While the proposal legislates that there shall be one, U.S. regional conference, it also continues jurisdictions as a unique structure found only within the United States. In a search for equity, it is problematic to continue an additional layer of organizational structure that serves only one region of the world. The present constitution makes it very difficult to change the boundaries and/or number of jurisdictions (see *2004 Book of Discipline*, ¶16.12).

2. The articulation of the powers of the General Conference through the Task Group’s enabling legislation removes authority presently lodged in the Central Conferences and specifies that the international General Conference will determine the content of one set of Social Principles, as well as rules concerning ordination and membership standards, for all Regional Conferences. For example, numerous Central Conferences have amended the Social Principles so that they are appropriate for their regional and cultural concerns. That would not be permitted in the Task Group’s Petition 24.

3. Petition 24 calls for general conferences to remain in the United States (to accommodate back-to-back meetings with the U. S. Regional Conference) until 2016 or 2020.

III. ALTERNATIVE PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES AVAILABLE THROUGH THE OKAYAMA/ROBBINS PROPOSAL

Several compelling desires have led to the Okayama/Robbins alternative: 1) That any renewal of the church be guided by General Conference; 2) That it address the inequities that presently exist; and 3) That it permit regional flexibility in mission and ministry, thus leading to a structure most able to fulfill the unified mission of the UMC, to make disciples for Jesus Christ. In order to carry out these desires, the following principles are presented. Included here are also a few words of explanation for each principle.

Principle 1: The geographical boundaries of Regional Conferences shall be arranged so that no one Regional Conference dominates The United Methodist Church fiscally or in any other way.

Explanation: A major concern addressed by the Task Group and other concerned persons revolves around the historic domination of U.S. interests within the UMC. The alternative proposal seeks to articulate and guarantee a change by presenting Principle 1 to the 2008 General Conference. The authors of the alternative do not believe that the maintenance of one U.S. Regional Conference should be mandated as a precondition in future decision-making, as is required by the Task Group legislation. The alternative principle was written to allow the ongoing study process, guided by the Holy Spirit, to assess the best possibilities for the creation of regional boundaries throughout the worldwide church. A renewed vision of the church should not be constrained by any predetermined, national boundaries. The General Conference will have the opportunity in 2012 to judge the merits of future work of a study group.

Principle 2: All Regional Conferences shall contribute to the apportioned funds of The United Methodist Church based on regional differences and as appropriate to the availability of resources.

Explanation: International organizations across the world have moved away from a situation where members from “developed countries” support financially the whole organization out of their own abundance. All members of an organization can contribute financially to some degree appropriate to their own fiscal capacity. Being denied the mechanisms and opportunity to do so results in their disenfranchisement. All sharing of resources can be mutual and supportive of the whole. The Task Group’s proposal would perpetuate a system where only one regional conference is asked to support fiscally the whole structure (with the exception of some support of the region’s own bishops). The alternative proposal presumes that all Central Conferences (to be renamed Regional Conferences) will be generally empowered by contributing to the extent they are able.

Principle 3: Each Regional Conference shall be empowered to permit United Methodists in each region to adopt and effectuate appropriate structures to address the following: regional and cultural considerations relating to missional activities, qualifications for ordination, chargeable offenses, and adopting “Social Principles” appropriate to the region. The General Agencies shall serve the worldwide United Methodist Church.

Explanation: The UMC has held for many years the principle that regions through the Central Conferences can make changes in the *Book of Discipline* “as the special conditions and the mission of the church in the area require...” (§543.7, also ¶31.5 in the *2004 Book of Discipline*). Central Conferences have utilized these provisions to make many changes that are largely unknown throughout the denomination, including changes to the Social Principles. The future study process will need to make recommendations to the General Conference regarding the extent to which Regional Conferences have the capacity to make changes in *The Book of Discipline*. The alternative proposal encompasses the principle that a truly unified and dynamic worldwide church needs the flexibility to meet the needs of international and regional differences.

Procedural Motions: The Okayama/Robbins proposal is in the form of a resolution containing provisions to ensure that the process is initiated and directed by the General Conference. The Okayama/Robbins proposal does not suggest constitutional or disciplinary changes in 2008. The General Conference needs to see the constitutional and disciplinary changes together to perceive fully the new vision presented before it. For this reason, all recommended legislative changes consistent with the principles enumerated in the Okayama/Robbins proposal can come before the 2012 General Conference. The alternative proposal calls for the new Task Group to be appointed by the Council of Bishops (the most geographically representative Council of the UMC), to be in dialogue with the Council and the Connectional Table, and to make its report and recommendations public as least twelve months before the 2012 General Conference.

TEXT OF THE ROBBINS/OKAYAMA ALTERNATIVE GENERAL CONFERENCE PETITION

Toward an Equitable Structure for the Renewal of Worldwide Ministry in The United Methodist Church

In recognition of the need for change and in appreciation of the efforts of the Task Group created this past quadrennium by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, Be it Resolved, that the General Conference itself implement a process for change toward equity and a renewed vision of the United Methodist Church. Accordingly, General Conference empower the Council of Bishops to appoint a Task Group on the Structure of The United Methodist Church that shall bring recommendations to the 2012 General Conference creating Regional Conferences and consistent with the following principles:

1. The geographical boundaries of Regional Conferences shall be arranged so that no one Regional Conference dominates The United Methodist Church fiscally or in any other way.
2. All Regional Conferences shall contribute to the apportioned funds of The United Methodist Church based on regional differences and as appropriate to the availability of resources.
3. Also, each Regional Conference shall be empowered to permit United Methodists in each region to adopt and effectuate appropriate structures to address the following: regional and cultural considerations relating to missional activities, qualifications for ordination, chargeable offenses, and adopting “Social Principles” appropriate to the region. The General Agencies shall serve the worldwide United Methodist Church.

Procedural Motions:

1. The Task Group shall place all constitutional and disciplinary changes for the renewed structure before the 2012 General Conference accompanied by a plan of implementation during the quadrennial following the anticipated approval of the constitutional changes by the

annual conferences. The Task Group shall make the proposal public twelve months before the 2012 General Conference.

2. In composing the Task Group, the Council of Bishops shall take into account equitable representation from the geographic regions of The United Methodist Church.

3. The Task Group shall report regularly and receive input from the Connectional Table and the Council of Bishops.

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