The United Methodist Church: A Connection for a Worldwide Mission

Executive Summary

Introductory Remark: Each of the topics 1-5 of this executive summary refers to an appendix with more details. Topic 6 states the questions for discussion and feedback to the Connectional Table.

1) A Connectional Church (see Appendix 1)

The United Methodist Church has a unique shape as a connectional church for participating in God’s mission in this world. As outlined in its Constitution, the two most important, connectional elements are its system of conferences and of general superintendency / bishops. Being a connectional church serves the mission of the Church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

2) Structure Follows Function (see Appendix 2)

The nature and mission of the church shapes its structure. Structure follows function and adapts to changing situations. Several study groups and reports on the level of general conference have worked on issues of the worldwide church over the last 25 years. General conference 2012 established a Covenant for the Worldwide United Methodist Church (BOD 2012 ¶125) based on core values, which are essential in any process of transformation.

Becoming partakers of God’s mission in this world and in accord with the “Covenant for a Worldwide UMC” (BOD 2012, ¶ 125), we value:
   1. Deeper connections throughout the church (Acts 1:8, John 15:1-11);
   2. Greater local authority (1 Cor. 12:4-13);
   3. More equitable sharing of power and representation around the world (1 Cor. 13:4).

3) Function on the different levels of conferences (see Appendix 3)

The United Methodist Church is a connectional structure maintained through its chain of conferences (BOD 2012, Part VI, Chapter Four: The Conferences).
   • A charge conference is the basic unit within the pastoral charge (BOD 2012, ¶ 246) and the connecting link between the local church and the general Church (BOD 2012, ¶ 247).
   • An annual conference is the fundamental body of the Church (BOD 2012, ¶ 11).
   • The general conference has full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional (BOD 2012, ¶ 16).
   • Jurisdictional conferences, which exist only within the US and central conferences, which exist only outside the US constitute an intermediate level between annual conferences and general conference. Both were created over time to meet particular needs. They have similarities, but also differences. Jurisdictional conferences were created in 1939 on the background of central conferences, which came into existence as early as in the 1880s in the Methodist Episcopal Church.
4) General Conference and its Book of Discipline (see Appendix 4)

General conference has become a worldwide body with a steadily increasing percentage of delegates from outside the US. It is the only body in the church with full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional. As a legislative body, it creates the Book of Discipline.

General conference 2012 created a new Part II “Global Book of Discipline” (BOD 2012 ¶ 101). ¶ 101 outlines that Parts I (Constitution), III (Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task), IV (The Ministry of All Christians) and V (Social Principles) shall be part of a Global Book of Discipline and not subject to adaptations. Furthermore, the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, in consultation with the Committee on Faith and Order, will bring recommendations to the 2016 General Conference as to which parts and paragraphs in Part VI of the Book of Discipline are not subject to change or adaptation.

Following action of general conference 2012, the secretary of general conference in cooperation with the General Board of Church and Society are mandated to work on Social Principles which more closely reflect the worldwide nature of our church and its biblical and Wesleyan heritage. The General Council on Finance and Administration has taken up the mandate to work on a global apportionment fund.

5) The Particular Situation of the US (see Appendix 5)

The US has been home to the creation of all the different predecessor churches, which merged into the United Methodist Church. All predecessor churches established a general conference as a delegated conference with delegates from all annual conferences all over the US. As the first annual conferences were established outside the US, they also sent delegates to the general conference, but remained a small minority delegation.

Today, delegates coming from outside the US make up almost 40% and their number is growing. They also serve as delegates to their respective central conferences where they can decide on regional issues, which are particular to them, including adaptations to certain parts of the general conference Book of Discipline.

This leads to an unresolved key-question: Where shall delegates from all the annual conferences in the US confer on issues, which are particular to the US?

This unresolved question affects general conference and also the parts of the church outside the US. It needs to be addressed on the basis of the core values expressed in the Covenant for a Worldwide Church.
6) Key Question for Discussion and Feedback (see Appendix 6)

Please discuss and give feedback to the following key question:

Where shall the UMC in the US “conference” on US-related matters for greater effectiveness in the mission of the church?

A. As at present on the worldwide level of the general conference?
B. In establishing a central conference for the US (as other regions in the world)?
C. In establishing a new structure? e.g. a joint meeting of all US jurisdictional conferences or other ideas? (Please specify your idea for a new structure)

1. Please respond: Which of the three options A, B, or C, would you prefer and why (and why not the other options)?

2. Please reflect and comment on how you perceive the consequences of your preferred option on:
   - The present general conference?
   - The present jurisdictional conferences in the US?
   - The present central conferences outside the US?
   - General agencies?
   - Annual conferences?
   - Local churches?

3. How would your preference enhance or detract from our disciple-making capacity?

4. What are other matters to consider, linked to your preferred option?

5. Additional question: Should a name change for “central conferences” be considered because of the painful history of the central jurisdiction in the US between 1939-68? If so, would you opt for “regional conferences” instead of “central conferences”? Or would you propose a different name?

Please send your feedback to the Connectional Table no later than August 31, 2014 by using the survey on the web at: www.umc.org/worldwide-nature-survey.

The findings of this survey will be reported to the COB and Connectional Table joint meeting in November 2014 and the Connectional Table and the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters joint meeting in February 2015. The joint meeting will confer on its recommendations, petitions and report to the 2016 General Conference.

Thank you for your contribution!

Bishop Patrick Streiff, chairperson
Mission Collaboration Group – World Wide Nature of the Church
Connectional Table
Appendix 1:

A Connectional Church

The United Methodist Church has a unique shape as a connectional church for participating in God’s mission in this world. The two most important, connectional elements are its system of conferences and of general superintendence / bishops. The Constitution of the United Methodist Church outlines in Division Two the organizational structure with several levels of conferences, and in Division Three the Episcopal supervision. Being a connectional church serves the mission of the Church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

BOD Part IV on the ministry of all Christians outlines this mission and ministry of the Church: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” (BOD 2012, ¶ 120). The opening paragraphs of part IV of the Discipline emphasize the global nature of the mission (BOD 2012, ¶ 120-125). They outline “the connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission. Integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom, we seek to proclaim and embody the gospel in ways responsible to our specific cultural and social context while maintaining ‘a vital web of interactive relationships’ “ (BOD 2012, ¶ 125).

BOD 2012, ¶ 132 focuses on the Journey of a Connectional People: “Connectionalism in the United Methodist tradition is multi-leveled, global in scope, and local in thrust. Our connectionalism is not merely a linking of one charge conference to another. It is rather a vital web of interactive relationships. We are connected by sharing a common tradition of faith, including Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules (¶ 104); by sharing together a constitutional polity, including a leadership of general superintendence; by sharing a common mission, which we seek to carry out by working together in and through conferences that reflect the inclusive and missional character of our fellowship; by sharing a common ethos that characterizes our distinctive way of doing things.”
Appendix 2:

Structure Follows Function

The nature and mission of the church shapes its structure. As BOD 2012, ¶ 132, states, “We are connected by sharing a common tradition of faith, ...; by sharing together a constitutional polity, including a leadership of general superintendency; by sharing a common mission, which we seek to carry out by working together in and through conferences that reflect the inclusive and missional character of our fellowship; by sharing a common ethos that characterizes our distinctive way of doing things.” Structure follows function and adapts to changing situations.

Several study groups and reports on the level of general conference have worked on issues of the worldwide church over the last 25 years. Even all over the 20th century, there were studies and reports prior to the merger which led to the United Methodist Church. The question how we can best live the mission and ministry in a worldwide church came again on the forefront since the 1990s.

Here is a list of the most important reports and studies since 2000:

- Report and Recommendations of the Connectional Process Team (2000), particularly parts III and IV.
- *Summary Report to General Conference (2012) from the Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of the United Methodist Church, ADCA 2012* (with 8 recommendations for further study after General Conference 2012).

You may download these studies at: [www.umc.org/worldwide-nature-studies](http://www.umc.org/worldwide-nature-studies)

Core values are essential in any process of transformation. General Conference 2012 established a *Covenant for the Worldwide United Methodist Church* (BOD 2012 ¶125) based on core values, which are essential in any process of transformation. Prayerfully read the Covenant Litany as you begin to think about the topics of this document.

As a Connectional Table, we have summarized the guiding values, which shall lead us on this journey as follows:

Becoming partakers of God’s mission in this world and in accord with the “Covenant for a Worldwide UMC” (BOD 2012, ¶ 125), we value:

1. Deeper connections throughout the church (Acts 1:8, John 15:1-11);
2. Greater local authority (1 Cor. 12:4-13);
3. More equitable sharing of power and representation around the world (1 Cor. 13:4).

As a Connectional Table, our objectives are:

- To uncover all matters relating to the worldwide nature of The United Methodist Church and connecting them with the common mission, vision, core values and resources.
- To facilitate conversations across the connection that may lead to legislative changes relating to the worldwide nature of The UMC at General Conference.
Appendix 3:

Function on the different levels of conferences

The United Methodist Church is a connectional structure maintained through its chain of conferences (BOD 2012, Chapter on Conferences). Each level of conference has a particular function. It all began with the annual conference, first in Great Britain, then in the US. And annual conferences have always remained the fundamental body of the church. Together with the charge conferences as the basic units within the pastoral charge, they form two levels of conferences which you find in all types of Methodist churches.

Early in the history of the US church, general conference was established as a delegated conference for keeping the unity among the annual conferences. Therefore, general conference has full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional. The establishment of a general conference, together with a general superintendency with bishops, has made a difference in the development of US-Methodism and its successors in comparison to British Methodism and its mission overseas.

As the mission of the US church expanded to other parts of the world and as annual conferences were established, such annual conferences outside the US yearned for more regional cooperation among them instead of having a structural link only to the US and general conference. This yearning gave birth to the central conferences in the 1880s in Asia. The central conferences became a powerful tool to delegate powers and responsibilities of general conference to regional bodies. It helped to raise indigenous Methodist leaders in the regions.

At the union of three Methodist denominations into the Methodist Church in 1939, the experience of central conferences outside the US inspired the creation of jurisdictional conferences in the US, even if less power was given to them than what central conferences had. On racial lines, a central jurisdiction was created for African Americans in the US. The central jurisdiction was dissolved at the merger of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968. The painful history of the central jurisdiction sheds negative connotations on the much older term of central conferences.

The attached PowerPoint highlights some of these developments and explains similarities and differences between central conferences outside the US and jurisdictional conferences in the US.
Appendix 4:

General Conference and the Book of Discipline

General conference has become a worldwide body with a steadily increasing percentage of delegates from outside the US. It is the only body in the church with full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional. It creates the Book of Discipline. Only central conferences have the right to make adaptations to the BOD. This right of adaptation is not precisely defined in the Book of Discipline.

The present BOD, edited by general conference has grown in volume and content largely through dealing with US-issues. The Study Committee on the worldwide nature of the church has raised an important issue during the 2008-12 quadrennium: What parts of the Book of Discipline are global and shall not be open to adaptation? General conference 2012 stated in ¶ 101 that parts I (Constitution), III (Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task), IV (The Ministry of All Christians) and V (Social Principles) shall be part of a Global Book of Discipline. With regard to part VI (Organization and Administration) it becomes much more difficult to make the distinction. Each single paragraph often goes from general, worldwide relevant statements to very detailed, US-based sub-points. Clarifying what should be part of a Global Book of Discipline is a huge and complex, yet urgently needed task.

The Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, in consultation with the Committee on Faith and Order, is presently working on a draft of what needs to bind the United Methodist Church connectionally together on a worldwide level. It is planned that a draft of essential elements will be sent into a consultation during summer 2014 with a feed-back in the fall of 2014.

There is a possibility that the recommendations to the 2016 General Conference will present an initial, but unfinished version for a “Global Book of Discipline” which will allow the whole UMC on a worldwide level to begin to live into a new reality during the 2016-20 quadrennium. Such an initial version for a “Global Book of Discipline” will help to build a large consensus in the church for the needed constitutional amendments on a Global Book of Discipline (including present constitutional rights of central conferences to adaptations) and to prepare the draft for the remaining parts of a Book of Discipline which may be adapted by central conferences, for final votes at general conference 2020.
Appendix 5:

The Particular Situation of the US

The US has been home to the creation of all the different predecessor churches, which merged into The United Methodist Church. All predecessor churches established a general conference as a delegated conference with delegates from all annual conferences all over the US. General conference has always been the body where the UMC in the US discussed all its common matters and established its general boards and commissions.

As the mission spread beyond the US and first annual conferences were established outside the US, such conferences also sent delegates to the general conference. They always remained a small minority, never reaching beyond 20% in the 19th and 20th century.

Today, delegates coming from outside the US make up almost 40% and their number continues to grow. These delegates come to the general conference for conferencing on worldwide issues. When it comes to their own respective regional issues, they confer and decide them at the regional level, in their central conferences, including adaptations to certain parts of the general conference Book of Discipline. They also serve as delegates to their respective central conferences. When they come to general conference, they discover on the agenda many particular US-issues, because US-delegates have no other conference level to discuss and decide them.

This leads to an unresolved key-question: Where shall delegates from all the annual conferences in the US confer on issues, which are particular to the US? (See point 6.)

This unresolved question affects general conference. It affects also the growing part of the United Methodist Church outside the US and even the relationship to autonomous affiliated and concordat churches who send delegates to general conference. This unresolved question needs to be addressed on the basis of the core values expressed in the Covenant for a Worldwide Church.