WORLDWIDE MINISTRY THROUGH THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
A Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church

Council of Bishops and The Connectional Table

THE WORLDWIDE MISSION OF THE UMC

The global dimensions of The United Methodist Church have resulted from the strong missionary outreach of its predecessor denominations. Faithfulness to the Wesleyan interpretation of the gospel imperative to share the joy of salvation in Christ and to become agents of that saving grace in serving neighbors through programs of personal and social development has manifested itself in a church implanted on five continents. . . .

The challenge has always been, and remains today, learning how to accommodate or enable the witness of this global community of faith within the connectional spirit and structure of Methodism.¹

We believe God needs a church that is more fully ready for worldwide mission and ministry. United Methodism, because of its missionary thrust and connectional nature, could play a leading role among Protestant churches in the 21st century in modeling a new way of being church in the world.

The world is changing. People move more often from one country to another. Many nations are more interdependent socially, economically, politically and spiritually than ever before. Many are connected by new means of digital communication. In that changing context (described variously as globalization, interdependence, or digital revolution) where the world is becoming more closely connected and interdependent, we believe that the missional witness of the disciples of Jesus Christ should also be appropriately connected and interdependent.

In short, The United Methodist Church should live into its worldwide nature more fully. We choose to use the word “worldwide” to describe the nature of United Methodism. “Worldwide” differs from “global” as it has been used in the discussion of recent decades. Referring to the world is wider and more appropriate than to the globe. The Church’s mission is to the world, not to the globe. “World”, theologically, is more than a geographic term: it is God’s blessed creation, God’s adversary in its fallen state, the object of God’s love and salvation through Christ and reconciliation.

WHY NOW?

The urgency is in attempting to answer our call as Christians to live differently in the world, to offer the world a better version of unity and interdependence, in short to be a counter culture. Recent developments in world Christianity call for a new emphasis on a concept of mission that addresses a world community and would not be impeded by national, cultural and economic barriers. A renewed conversation was initiated during the 2004–2008 quadrennium as a result of: 1) new mission initiatives, missional cooperation and church growth, especially in Africa, 2) new initiatives by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, 3) the possibility of the congregations in the Philippines seeking greater relationship with other Methodist churches in Asia and therefore considering autonomy, and 4) the establishing by the 2004 General Conference of a Consultation to Study the Relationship between the Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean and The United Methodist Church.

While we celebrate the worldwide nature of our ministry as United Methodists, we confess that too often we fail to operate as the body of Christ as described in 1 Corinthians 12. As with secular society, economic and political power in the denomination rests in the United States. A look at the Book of Resolutions provides proof of the predominance of U.S.-centric issues at general conference. We know that cultures outside of the United States are just as complex, yet the legislation does not reflect the complexity. Why?

U.S. dominance in denominational governance damages both the church in the United States and in central conferences. It disempowers central conferences
from being fully actualized within the body and allows
the church in the United States to escape responsibility
from dealing with its internal issues. To be whole is to
take responsibility for all that God gives us and to value
the unique gifts that God spreads among God’s people.
To be whole is to value all. Our structures must reflect
this value and prompt us to ever-greater degrees of
responsibility for reflecting God’s reign in the church
and the world.

**THE UMC’S CONNECTIONAL NATURE**

The United Methodist Church is connectional. 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.

The work of the current Task Group proceeds from
our understanding of our United Methodist identity.
United Methodism, through its connectional nature, is—
by its very essence—truly catholic. As a “catholic” move-
ment, it cannot be confined by nation, country, continent,
race or class, but transcends such borderlines and pertains
to the whole world. It is this world to which John Wesley
refers in his famous dictum “I look upon the whole world
as my parish.” Coined in a controversy about the right to
evangelize, Wesley’s universal proclamation of Good
News to all persons violated canonical principles of
parish rights in his time. Wesley was convinced that the
universal task of spreading the gospel must not be hin-
dered. He would not recognize any limits.

At the same time The United Methodist Church
lives in ecumenical relationships. Our connectional
nature as well as our constitution commits us to this
self-understanding and to our efforts to work for greater
unity in Christ’s Church. Our involvement in the ecu-
menical family might be described in a series of over-
lapping circles, showing those “family ties” moving
from closest to more distant relationships.

Circle 1—The United Methodist Church—all bod-
ies subject to The UMC’s General Conference (our
nuclear family)

Circle 2—Affiliated Autonomous and Affiliated
United Churches (our extended family)

Circle 3—Churches who belong to the Pan
Methodist Commission (our cousins)

Circle 4—Churches who belong to the World
Methodist Council (our extended tribal family)

Circle 5—Churches who belong to various national
councils of churches and the World Council of Churches
(participants in reunions of related families)

Circle 6—Churches who do not belong to national
councils or the World Council of Churches (distant
cousins, aunts and uncles)

**Family Ties of The United Methodist Church**

All of these relationships are important and need
to be strengthened. At the same time, the conversa-
tion about the worldwide nature of The United
Methodist Church and how we appropriately live
more fully in that reality is important and deserves
our attention as well.

**INTENT OF THIS LEGISLATION**

The Task Group proposes that the following legis-
lation as a first step toward living more fully into the
worldwide nature that already exists in our church in a
limited way. It does two things:

- Makes four constitutional changes allowing a
  future General Conference to create structures for
  regional and jurisdictional conferences that are
  the same everywhere The United Methodist
  Church is in ministry.
- Provides for continued study and a report to the
  2012 General Conference by the Connectional
  Table and Council of Bishops.
We are submitting 23 petitions that amend the constitution in ways that will allow for the creation of a regional conference for the United States and that change the name from “central conference” to “regional conference.” The legislation does not create an US regional conference, but makes it possible for General Conference to do so at a later time if it so chooses. An additional petition asks for further study of the worldwide nature of the church to be conducted by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table.

The proposed legislation does not do any of the following:

- It does not change the number, purpose or function of Jurisdictional Conferences.
- It does not change the way bishops are elected or assigned.
- It does not change the purpose, number or scope of any general agency.
- 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.

**CHANGE IN NAME FROM CENTRAL TO REGIONAL**

Throughout the constitution, we are proposing that the name “central conference” be changed to “regional conference.” The word “central” was first used in the late nineteenth century to facilitate missionary work outside the United States. The meaning of the term is no longer clear to most persons. Further, there are negative connotations with the Central Jurisdiction which existed for purposes of segregation. Thus, the word “regional” expresses the idea that all the annual conferences in a particular region engage in common mission together to serve God in that region. The word will easily translate into other languages.

**RATIONALE FOR THE LEGISLATION**

General Conference should be able to create similar structures for all of our worldwide church. Each Annual Conference, should belong to a Central Conference which should be able to organize sub-units called Jurisdictional Conferences. Further study is needed to explore how to live more fully into our worldwide nature.

The Petitions were approved by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table at their respective meetings in May, 2007.

**Members of the Task Force**

Bishop Ann B. Sherer, Chair
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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In the past 40 years, the Council of Bishops as well as other groups have studied, listened, and sought legislation that would allow our church to live with integrity in our many manifestations around the world. Each conversation has brought new insight and hope. The following historical reviews and “working papers” of the task group are examples of the denomination’s attention to this central matter.

**I. OUR THEOLOGY AT WORK**

The work of the current Task Group proceeds from our understanding of our United Methodist identity. United Methodism, through its connectional nature, is—by its very essence—truly catholic. As a “catholic” movement, it cannot be confined by nation, country, continent, race or class, but transcends such borderlines and pertains to the whole world. As a worldwide church, United Methodism proves its “Catholic ubiquity.”

In the recent discussion on the “global nature” of The United Methodist Church, points have been made about numbers of adherents and geographical distribution to decide, whether United Methodism is a worldwide church or not. The attempt has been made to locate the place of United Methodism in a typology of church structures in comparison to churches of other traditions, labeling The United Methodist Church as an “Extended-National Confessional” church, a US denomination with some outposts on other continents. Instead of seeking to be a “global United Methodist Church,” recommendation is made to participate in World Methodist endeavors and contacts with Concordat, Autonomous and Affiliated churches as well as involvement in global Christianity through the Ecumenical movement. While all these endeavors have their merits and are helpful in the process of clarification of United Methodism’s role and mission in our world today, they almost completely
fail to consider the polity of United Methodism. In this way, they look at results and outside criteria and activities to determine the nature of United Methodism. We choose rather go in the opposite direction, showing that worldwide outreach and distribution flow from United Methodism’s “catholic” nature, which is distinctively expressed in the connectional system. While not denying the necessity and benefits of United Methodist participation in cooperation with other Methodist and World church bodies, it is our goal to demonstrate United Methodism’s inherent catholicity.

We choose to use the word “worldwide” to describe the nature of United Methodism. “Worldwide” differs from “global” as it has been used in the discussion of recent decades. For many, the word “global” is problematic, tainted and blessed by the present process of “globalization.” Global United Methodism could be seen as part of a world trend, characterized by homogenization and dominance of Western economy and culture. “Worldwide” Methodism existed, and the word has been used, for many decades before “global” became fashionable. Referring to the world is wider and more appropriate than to the globe. The Church’s mission is to the world, not to the globe. “World,” theologically, is more than a geographic term: it is God’s blessed creation, God’s adversary in its fallen state, the object of God’s love and salvation through Christ and reconciliation.

It is this world, to which John Wesley refers in his famous dictum “I look upon the whole world as my parish.” It was coined in a controversy about the right to evangelize. Wesley’s universal proclamation of Good News to all persons violated canonical principles of parish rights in his time. Wesley was convinced that the universal task of spreading the gospel must not be hindered. He would not recognize any limits. For this he used the term “catholic.” While he was at odds with Roman Catholicism—as usual in his time for an English churchman with an evangelical zeal—he declared and maintained his catholicity. More specifically, he derived his right to evangelize from his ordination “to defend the Catholic faith.” He remained a faithful member of the Church of England to his death, but he clearly saw her limitations as a national church and he practiced a faith that went beyond her boundaries. His spirit and his relationship with other people grew toward a wider fellowship than the ecclesial structures of his time. The best known document of his principles and his attitude is the sermon “Catholic Spirit.” Wesley imprinted on his followers as “fundamental principle . . . an anti-sectarian and Catholic spirit.” It has been noticed that the organizational pattern of the Methodist movement, too, follows catholic principles.

A look at the “Methodist Connection” gives proof of this. This peculiar system of organization that grew out of the Methodist movement, first (and still) known in England as “Connexion,” describes the interdependence of persons, congregations, conferences and agencies on a variety of levels. In Methodist vernacular it has become synonymous for “Church,” and it “remains one of the greatest contributions made by Wesley to ecclesial polity.” Though it would be interesting to look at United Methodist ecclesiology from the guiding principle of Connectionalism, we will concentrate on its catholic characteristics. Frank Baker describes “the general pattern of the connexional system” as a “society . . . subdivided into classes . . . with lay leaders, who assured the flow of inspiration and information between the individual members . . . , supervised by lay itinerant preachers; a network of itinerant preachers moving from society to society throughout the nation. . . . The itinerant system linked Methodism into a living unity, a ‘connexion’ . . . The Established Church was a national machine. . . . The Methodist societies were much more a national body.” What Baker describes here is obviously a movement; however its organizational principle was the “Connexion, which in many ways admirably displayed the traditional Catholic ideal of strong and authoritative Church government, effectually exercised over the whole constituency of the faithful, and uniting them into one body.” As a unified body in “Anglican” England, “Catholic” Ireland and “Reformed” Scotland, it overcame traditional confessional divisions, representing the catholicity of the undivided Church. This even goes beyond traditional Western Christianity, representing Eastern Orthodox principles as well. “Those realizing [Wesley’s] strong ties with the primitive Greek tradition might suggest that Methodism was a new attempt at creating a Pilgrim community of the Holy Spirit, dedicated to Sobornost, ‘a community distinguished by unity in freedom and creating out of many races and nations the family of the redeemed.’”

“Sobornost” is the translation of “Catholicity” in the Slavic Orthodox churches, e.g. the Nicene Creed. In view of the similarity of “Connection” with “Catholicity” and “Sobornost,” Methodists could well translate the “marks of the Church” in the Nicene Creed: I believe in one holy connectional and apostolic Church.

From its very early time this connection was international, though on both sides of the Atlantic under the British crown. American Independence was a decisive
moment for the coherence of the Connection. We do not need to rehearse the steps that led to the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church at the 1784 Christmas Conference. John Wesley’s famous letter, however, needs to be read carefully in light of the accompanying actions. He states the full freedom of the “American Brethren . . . both from the State and from the English hierarchy.” Therefore, “They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church.”

Wesley released them from obedience to the crown and the bishops. He did not release them from obedience to the Methodist connectional discipline. To the contrary, “follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church” for Wesley and all Methodists meant: follow the Methodist way. To make this unmistakably clear, he sent a few more documents as appendices to that letter: a creed (The Articles of Faith), a liturgy (The Sunday Service), and a Discipline (The Large Minutes). There was no need to explicitly enforce Mr. Wesley’s authority among his “sons (sic) in the gospel.” It was undisputed, as he had explained it, for example at the 1769 Conference: “I am under God the centre of union to all our traveling as his “sons (sic) in the gospel.” It was undisputed, as he had explained it, for example at the 1769 Conference: “I am under God the centre of union to all our traveling as well as local preachers.”

The strong spiritual and organizational ties of the church in the US with its parts on other continents found an expression in shared oversight over “the Connection at large.” Other components were close cooperation and visits between the various parts of Methodism. Methodism was nurturing a sense of connectedness to the whole world—Methodists and others were experiencing a worldwide church.

Unhindered by national sentiment and traditions, the Methodist Connection could grow throughout the North American continent over the 19th century—and beyond this continent. Its structure (Conferences etc.) and policy became a model for other groups and communities, even those with a less coherent polity. To the contrary, in England, Methodism returned to more traditional and particular national models of church organization. “The Methodist Connexion increasingly gravitated towards ‘the Dissenting interest,’ and in the 19th century assumed a natural place among the Nonconformists.”

Methodists in Britain and the US never ceased in the noble duty, defined by John Wesley for all Methodists “to proclaim the good tidings of salvation.” They both did it at home and abroad. They differed, however, in the way they dealt with their grown up “children.” In the mid-19th century, English Methodism started to release foreign missions into national independency and autonomy, while American Methodists started with new forms of episcopal oversight for “overseas” parts of the Connection. This and other measures (e.g. the creation of Central Conferences, various international programs and studies, agencies with representation from all parts of the worldwide church) were “an expression of the structural principle that areas outside the US are not mere colonies of the American church but fully qualified parts of the church that design their own rules according to their conditions of life, however within the framework of the common constitution. . . . While English Methodism looks upon national autonomy in the different countries and, therefore, renounces organic union, American Methodism on its part seeks to build up the idea of federation, more and more granting responsibility of self-administration to the church in various continents and countries but maintaining the organic union of the worldwide Methodist Episcopal Church.”

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There are numerous examples to this day: the Mission Initiatives of the General Board of Global Ministries, which started in 1991 with the “Russia Initiative” and provide “hands on” experiences of the worldwide connection of The United Methodist Church even for local churches and individuals; partnership programs between Annual Conferences and Episcopal areas on different continents; and international gatherings and convocations of youth, students, women, men and clergy. All are expressions of the connectional structure of United Methodism and communicate an experience of the true catholic church, share in its mission, bridge the gaps and divisions in the human family and pave the way for the world community of all Christian believers.

We affirm the contributions that United Methodists of varying ethnic, language, cultural, and national groups make to one another, and to our Church as a
whole. We celebrate our shared commitment to clear theological understanding and vital missional expression.

United Methodists as a diverse people continue to strive for consensus in understanding the gospel. In our diversity, we are held together by a shared inheritance and a common desire to participate in the creative and redemptive activity of God.

Our task is to articulate our vision in a way that will draw us together as a people in mission.

In the name of Jesus Christ we are called to work within our diversity while exercising patience and forbearance with one another.

II. BEGINNING DIRECTIONS FOR OUR TIME
(a working paper)

A strong and clear word of gratitude must be extended to the General Board of Global Ministries. The Board has been a major contributor in the building of relationships and ministry around the world. While once only the General Board of Global Ministries had members on its board of directors from beyond the United States, today nearly all general boards and agencies do. The Board has provided staff and resources around the world to assist in maintaining our connection.

Annual conferences, congregations and yes, even individuals, have increasingly built direct relationships with one another across the world. Volunteers in mission, partner congregations, visiting faculty opportunities, disaster response, and pulpit exchanges all expand knowledge and care for one another.

Yet despite our many studies, debates, consultations and conversations, if we look closely at our predominant practice, we find The United Methodist Church still operates from a consciousness that places the church in the United States central to denominational life, much like the consciousness that led to the naming of conferences outside of the United States as “central,” central meaning emanating from the United States.

Some might say that this is appropriate given that the majority of members and financial resources are “centered” in the United States. Still others might name this moment as a “crucial” moment in the life of the denomination as we consider our relationships with one another. Perhaps God is calling us yet to reflect more deeply on John Wesley’s formative statement, “I look upon the world as my parish.”

While we are called as United Methodist Christians to right relationship in the world—inside and outside of our structure—our actions do not consistently reflect our highest and best hopes. As Bishop Clarence Carr, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, stated skeptically during the Service of Repentance and Reconciliation at General Conference 2000, “For what you do speaks so loud I cannot hear what you say.”

Much work remains to be done.

1) This conversation must be expanded and deepened. Written responses will be requested from leaders in all of the Affiliated Autonomous Churches. Conversations will be sought wherever members of the task force and leaders of these churches can get together.

2) We hope that a broader conversation will develop within The United Methodist Church to support greater understanding and dialogue surrounding the theology, history and recommendations contained in this paper in and amongst the congregations and conferences across the connection.

The Task Group invites The United Methodist Church to ponder the following questions:

- If we are a worldwide church by theology, how completely do we live our theology?
- How shall we order our life together as United Methodists on many continents so as to honor the contributions of all?
- Will we give equal weight to what is on the hearts and minds of all who gather in holy conferencing?
- Are United Methodists in the United States willing to address issues of power, trust, control, and fear—both within itself as well as in its relationships with those beyond its borders?
- Will the church in the United States address the matter of “privilege” that accrues to it via money and membership?
- Will we disseminate information in a manner that honors differences in language and culture, especially in our decision-making processes?
The United Methodist Church is changing and becoming. Living as a worldwide church we are invited to remember the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth: “Power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Footnotes


2. See the classic definition of Catholicism by Vincent of Lerins: “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all” (“ubi que, semper, ab omnibus”).


4. “I was not appointed to any congregation at all; but was ordained as a member of the ‘College of Divines’ (so our statutes express it,) ‘found to overturn all heresies, and defend the Catholic faith.” Wesley’s Works, ed. Jackson, vol. VIII, p. 117.


6. In his famous “world parish” letter to James Hervey, Wesley wrote about his principles: “If you ask on what principle, then, I acted; it was this: ‘A desire to be a Christian; and a conviction that whatever I judge conducive thereto, that I am bound to do; wherever I judge I can best answer this end, thither it is my duty to go. On this principle I set out for America; on this, I visited the Moravian Church; and on the same am I ready now (God being my helper) to go to Abyssinia or China, or whithersoever it shall please God, by this conviction, to call me.’” Quoted in his Journal, see Works, ed. Jackson vol. I, p. 200s.

7. “For thirty years last past, I have ‘gradually put on a more catholic spirit’, finding more and more tenderness for those who differed from me.” Works, ed. Jackson vol. IX, p. 55.


11. To this author’s knowledge, a comprehensive presentation of United Methodist ecclesiology is still lacking, though most desirable. The usual discussion, whether the UMC is a church or a movement (as recently shown by the discussion of the “Johnson Case” and its treatment by the Judicial Council), could be overcome by a serious treatment of the connectional principle of a church that, built on mutual interrelationships, maintains its character as a movement, lest it becomes a “dead sect” —to use Mr. Wesley’s words.


15. “As our American Brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.” —The Letters of John Wesley, Standard Edition, London, Epworth 1931, vol. VII, p. 238s.


17. It should be remembered that Wesley’s editorial work was as clearly expressing his ideas as his writings as an author.


