

Thomas Edward Frank, professor and scholar of American Religious History at Wake Forest University, presented these remarks during a panel discussion at the Pre-General Conference News Briefing in Tampa, Fla., on January 20, 2012.



The approach of General Conference, with many proposals on the table for significant change in the church and reform of our practices, brings to the forefront again our responsibility as faithful United Methodists to ask questions – good, searching, critical questions – that will help advance our church in directions we want it to go.

So I want to pose two kinds of questions for conversation about plans for restructuring the general church, arising out of my teaching and research about UM traditions and polity and more broadly in the field of church leadership and administration.

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What are the principles of polity on which general church structure should be based?

To explore this question we have to turn first and foremost to the constitution of the UMC. I urge you as delegates to study this document again and again in preparation for Tampa.

Here are *five constitutional principles* of polity that have an impact on general church structure:

1. *Conference*: Methodists make decisions together, in conference, in conversation that is a means of grace. Methodism has never had a central executive committee or board with powers over the mission, money, and ministries of the whole church. Frustrating as it has always been that General Conference (GC) has met only once every four years since 1792 (and I've found complaints about this going back before 1900), no single body has ever been created, the powers and duties of which include acting for the whole connection in between sessions of GC. The only agencies GC has ever created are completely amenable to GC, that is, they must carry out their assigned duties and may not exceed them. (The same principle applies in annual conferences as well.)
2. *Episcopacy*: Constitutionally on equal footing with conference is the principle of episcopacy or oversight (Gr: *epi-skopos*). Methodists (excepting the Methodist Protestant branch) have always been guided by the oversight of bishops, presiders of our conferences, superintendents of our ministries, leaders of our mission, our principal preachers and advocates of our connectional covenants, whose constant travel and persuasive presence knits us together as a connection. The constitution spells out little of what it terms the bishops' "general oversight and promotion of the spiritual and temporal interests of the whole church" (§47). The GC and *Book of Discipline (BOD)* to a great extent leave episcopal practices to the initiative of our bishops – as a Council of Bishops (COB) and individually.
3. *Separation of powers*: thus the constitution clearly sets out a separation of conference and episcopal powers, enabling each to make its distinct contribution to the church. For example, annual

conferences cannot elect their own presidents or make the bishop into a chief executive officer answerable to them. No conference can delegate to a bishop the executive power to carry out a mandate. Bishops cannot legislate in any conference or impose themselves as managers of conference programs. Note that every annual conference restructure plan that Judicial Council has reviewed in the last 15 years has had to meet this constitutional test.

4. *Inclusiveness*: this is what our constitution calls it (§4), though I've never like the implication of this term that somebody is already on the inside deciding to include others. I prefer participation – the church's ideal that all members have the right and the opportunity to participate fully in the life of the church. Of course, Methodists have never had sheer radical democracy. We have always believed (since 1808, anyway) that GC should be a delegated or representative conference, and thus the right of all constituencies of the church to be represented. (Annual conferences too, of course, also have only one lay person per clergy member under appointment to a charge, regardless of the number of professing members in the charge.) The UMC in its 44 years has gone all out to ensure this principle of representative participation in anything controlled by GC, in particular, by mandating that constituencies in the minority of our membership have enough critical mass in our boards and agencies to have an effective voice – the 30% rule (§705.3.d). This has become part of our DNA. Any unit or body that gathers to do official work without ethnic diversity at the table seems weird, incomplete, unjust, and unworkable.
5. *Fiduciary duty and differentiated functions of program and finance*: this principle is less visible in the constitution than it is in the long-standing legislative provisions of our *BOD* in every body from local church to general agency. Functional authority over program is not to be mixed with functional authority over money. The powers of money management are not to be confused with powers over initiatives in ministry and mission. Separation of the two prevents consolidation of power and advances accountability and participation. The UMC is hardly alone in this principle – it is basic to the functioning of any legitimate non-profit corporation or non-governmental organization. A distinct office(r) accounts for the finances and avoids programmatic initiative. A distinct office(r) initiates program and mission and does not write the checks that pay for it. Both report directly to the governing body, which in the UMC's case is the GC.

Those are five key principles of polity – there may be more that you'd want to consider – and legislation of the scope of this denominational restructure must meet these constitutional tests of principle. Whether or not the Connectional Table (CT) legislative petition meets these tests is a matter for searching conversation. I do want to pose a couple of questions to provoke that conversation:

- Is the proposed Center for Connectional Ministry and Mission an executive agency for the whole church? Appropriate language of amenability to GC is included in proposed §704. At the same time, the Center has sweeping powers and duties of management over the vast majority of GC work. How will this function on the ground? Will such a Center not inevitably take actions deemed necessary under a GC mandate that will grow too broad to provide meaningful amenability?
- Does the proposed Center conflate powers over money with powers over program? How would these be separated in practice, especially if the constitution is changed so that an oversight council that oversees program can also move money around?
- Can a Center with a single CEO and a governing board of only 15 people adequately represent the multiple constituencies and interests of the UMC? How will those interests be included in the Center's work?

Closely related to these constitutional questions are questions of *organizational leadership and administrative practice*.

The tremendous energy and drive of the Call to Action and its sheer pace of action is truly astonishing. When we're moving at this tempo, we need to do so in a framework of critical questioning as well – speed makes for poor decisions, muddled wordings, and disciplinary confusion. The 2004 GC, for example, failed to provide any specific basis for the CT in the constitution or in the authorizing legislative paragraphs for general agencies (the CT fits no category in ¶703). This must not happen again.

The proposed legislation is much more finely crafted than that, and the CT legislative writing team has done excellent work. But you as delegates have a duty to ask probing questions so that we get the best legislation possible:

- *Will the proposed restructure accomplish its desired ends, or achieve exactly the opposite of what it intends?* The same impulse to consolidate and achieve economies of scale drove the general agency restructure when the UMC was created 44 years ago. A plan of four general program boards was going to increase efficiency and accountability, consolidate independent duplicative efforts, and lead to greater coordination. The Call to Action decries this old plan as “bureaucracy” and pleads for “streamlined connectional structures.” Will putting all general agency powers and duties under a single Center advance accountability, and break down the organizational distance and growing lack of trust that the Apex report (see the CT’s Apex consultant report on structure posted on the CT website) identified as a widely perceived problem in the church (and that the bishops’ November statement also named)? Or will it actually end up growing even more features of bureaucracy that we profess not to like – such as top-down directives to annual conferences and congregations, or the “prescriptive, rule-based culture and environment” that the Apex report notes as a complaint – thus further accelerating organizational distance and lack of trust?
- *Is the proposed restructure right-sized for an organization of the scale and complexity of the UMC?* This proposal bears a lot of resemblance to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America restructure of 2011, when that denomination consolidated its general church work into five offices under a church council of about 45 members authorized to act on behalf of the churchwide assembly that meets every two years (see www.elca.org). Nice to be on the same wavelength as other Protestants, except that the ELCA is less than half our size, with about 10,000 congregations and 4.2 million baptized members in the United States. (The proposal also bears a lot of resemblance to the Connectional Process Team idea of a Covenant Council at GC 2000, which also merged previously distinct authorities into one body – a proposal not adopted.) Is the proposed structure complex enough to be supple and responsive to the many varied constituencies of the UMC scattered across the globe? When I read through the 220 pages of legislation spelling out the duties of our general agencies, I have to ask, can one council of 15 people and one CEO really grasp the breadth, the history, the nuances, of the manifold tasks we want these agencies to carry out? And if we have to stop doing some things, can 15 people be knowledgeable enough to make decisions about reordering the work of what is now nine different agencies with multiple specialized offices?
- *What are our criteria for shaping the work of our general agencies, or more broadly our general connectional structure?* I was puzzled to see in the Apex report that survey respondents ranked general agencies low on competencies in “making disciples of Jesus Christ” and in carrying out the “four areas of focus.” I don’t understand the logic here. All of our agencies are trying to give witness to the kingdom of God

in their own domain of specialization. How is that not an expression of our mission? Don't we have specialization exactly so we can make a good stab at addressing focused needs? Why should our agencies with their worlds of expertise have to answer to all of them?

- *Are “vital congregations” an appropriate focus for the work of general agencies?* Everybody wants vital congregations – I certainly do. But do we really want congregations to be the primary point of accountability for what we do as a connection through our general agencies? I thought that the work of our connection came first – the things we can do together that are far more than we could accomplish alone – and that our congregations were accountable to our ministry as a worldwide connection (including things a particular congregation might not really want to do!). Does the Call to Action and now CT proposal pull this balance back toward the local?

“Who is going to lead change in the church?” That’s the question that jumped out for me from the Apex report. The CT and the COB have stepped up to this challenge with a complete restructure idea. Now it’s up to you to ask good questions, have probing conversation, and as a conference, act.

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