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What Difference Does Our Polity Make? A Framework for Considering Structural Change

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The 2012 General Conference will convene in an atmosphere charged with anticipation and anxiety. The Connectional Table and Council of Bishops have challenged the church to a *Call to Action*—a complete change of culture, structure, and practice. We must weigh carefully the extent to which this proposed change asks us to become a different kind of organization from what The United Methodist Church was created to be in 1968.

We need to pay special attention to the basic principles of polity embedded in our church's 1968 constitution. Not only do they represent the distilled wisdom of generations of United Methodists and our predecessor denominations. They also give us a frame for understanding the nature of the UMC as an organization and for judging the impact of any proposed changes.

Conference

Methodists make decisions together, in conference, in conversation that is a means of grace. The first records of Methodist conferences in England were the *Minutes of Several Conversations Between Mr. Wesley and Others*—a compendium of conversations compiled over the years from the first conference in 1744. Christian conversations in Methodism over decades of struggle have become increasingly open, welcoming previously suppressed voices of women as well as men, persons of all backgrounds ethnically and culturally—including those previously excluded—and today trying to rise to the challenge of creating and nurturing a global conversation.

Basing governance on conversation in conference is extremely challenging. But Methodists figured out a long time ago that it beats any alternative. Consequently Methodists have never designated a central executive committee or board with powers over the mission, money, and ministries of the whole church. No single body has ever been created, the powers and duties of which include acting for the whole connection in between sessions of General Conference.

Our general boards and agencies are amenable to General Conference, not to any central executive body. Their work is the

outgrowth of generations of United Methodist action in all areas of life. They represent the flourishing of conference, embracing an astonishing array of commitments of our church's diverse constituencies around the world. They are not programs to be managed, but ministries of our whole, worldwide connection of conferences.

Episcopacy

Constitutionally on equal footing with conference is the principle of episcopacy or oversight. Bishops constitute the church by playing the crucial role of presiding in our annual conferences, making good conversation possible. They act as superintendents of our ministries and leaders of our mission. They are our principal preachers and advocates of our connectional covenants, especially for the directions set by General Conference. Through their constant travel and persuasive presence, bishops knit us together as a connection. After all, conferences are assemblies that in a real sense exist only when they are meeting. They have no continuing executive bodies, and no session can even so much as bind the next session. The episcopacy is essential, constitutive, in binding us together as a connection.

Given how essential this role is, the constitution spells out little of what it terms the bishops' "general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual interests of the entire church" (§47). The roots of this lie in the distinction of conference and episcopacy as constitutional powers. General Conference cannot tell another constitutional power how to do its job.

The *Call to Action* continues the bishops' intention to fulfill their constitutional mandate by speaking as a conciliar voice to the challenges that face the contemporary UMC. Today's bishops are also of a mind with bishops in earlier Councils who have been frustrated by the lack of continuity in their work. They cannot act as a Council without some kind of continuous office of leadership, especially as a global Council. This is a compelling rationale for amending the constitution so that one bishop can be relieved of "presidential and residential responsibilities" in order to focus on advancing the work of the Council of Bishops (COB). The proposal that this executive of the COB should also head a singular Council of Strategy and Oversight created by General Conference, however, raises critical questions of how these two constitutional powers relate to each other.

Separation of Powers

A third constitutional principle governs the relationship between the two primary constitutive elements of the

UMC. 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. Conversely, 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 of separation of powers.

Inclusiveness

We have noted already that conversation is a powerful mode of proceeding because it is inherently open and has the potential to include multiple voices at the table. The principle of inclusiveness is foremost in the church's constitution (§4). It is not optional, or to be carried out when convenient. If it is in the constitution, then inclusiveness actually constitutes the church, and no church governing body can be legitimate without being inclusive.

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 *Book of Discipline* in every body from local church to general agency. Functional authority over program is not to be mixed with functional authority over money. Separation of the two prevents consolidation of power and advances accountability and participation. This is especially critical in a large membership organization like the UMC, spread over many nations and governing itself by conferences that meet only on occasion.

Any legislation of the scope of denominational restructure must meet the test of these five constitutive principles of polity. The *Call to Action* asks us to consider significant organizational change. We need to do so in a framework of critical questioning and careful judgment. Haste can make for *Disciplinary* confusion and decisions that do not reflect who we are as an organization.

