A Letter to a New Delegate
William B. Lawrence

General Conference and the Media
M. Garlinda Burton

Pentecost and Then:
Waiting with the Spirit
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Spring 2000

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Special Issue Editors: Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence

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Introduction

General Conference

The invitation to edit an issue on General Conference could be construed as an opportunity to coach delegates and other actors at the event on controversial and potentially divisive issues that will doubtless be on the agenda—abortion, homosexuality, same-sex unions, appointments, the proposal by the Connectional Process Team. That rather instinctive response tempted my colleagues and me (the other two principals in the "United Methodism and American Culture" project, Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence), but only briefly. We had, after all, addressed some of those issues in our volume Questions for the Twenty-first Century Church (Abingdon, 1999). Even in this book we had sought to pose questions rather than provide answers. We suggested that some of the more difficult issues before the church deserved more in the way of study, reflection, discernment, and prayer and less in the way of hasty, legislated power plays and formal resolutions.

Thus, we thought, the invitation to write for Quarterly Review would similarly occasion a look at the longer term—at the processes, assumptions, procedures, and structures by which General Conferences do and then transmit their work to the church. Examining how the church at this level has functioned may, we imagined, help those so engaged to appreciate options and courses of action—even on controversial issues—that they did not know they had. To such expectations these essays, we believe, live up.

Consequently, I undertake a short history of General Conference as a popular assembly that takes on the daunting task of crafting the
sacred literature by which the Methodist people live—a continuation of
the audacity and presumption of the Christmas Conference (1784) that
birthed the Methodist Episcopal Church. James Kirby looks at the role of
the general superintendent in General Conferences, interpreting current
practices in light of longer-term patterns. Ned Dewire describes the
activities of the general secretary and of the general agencies at General
Conferences; while Dennis Campbell, for his part, examines the various
expectations and involvements of the legislative-committee chair.
Garlinda Burton reflects on General Conferences and the media: how the
class has presented itself to external publics and where the church press
and other outlookers fit into the General Conference picture. Faith
Richardson also concerns herself with the interpretation and transmission
of General Conference’s work but focuses particularly on its basic task;
namely, the writing of the Book of Discipline. Even in exercising this
prerogative, which belongs to it and it alone, General Conference, it turns
out, depends on the agency of others.

William Lawrence suggests how all this may look to a first-time delegate
to General Conference and how such a delegate can responsibly find his or
her own place in the drama that is General Conference.

Finally, Paul Escamilla’s reflections on the Lectionary readings for
Ordinary Time remind the church of its responsibility to be faithful in
tasks both great and small and of the Spirit-bestowed grace that makes
such faithfulness possible.

Russell E. Richey
Duke Divinity School
Durham, North Carolina

NOTE: Richey, Campbell, and Lawrence, the special editors of this
issue, co-author and co-edit the several volumes in the United
Methodism and American Culture series and were principals in the
Lilly Endowment project from which these volumes emanate. Four
volumes have appeared; and a fifth, synthetic volume is in preparation.
The first four are Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and
Identity (1997), The People(s) Called Methodist: Forms and Reforms
of their Life (1998), Doctrines and Discipline (1999), and Questions
for the Twenty-first Century Church (1999). All are published by
Abingdon Press.
Dear Dana,

I am glad you enjoyed the card, and I am willing to share some observations that may assist you in preparing for the meeting in Cleveland.

Let me reassure you, however, that my words of congratulation are sincere. You have been given a great honor in being chosen by your peers as a delegate to General Conference. Some years ago, when I

William B. Lawrence is senior minister at Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, and adjunct professor at Wesley Theological Seminary. He is the author of Sundays in New York.
was attending graduate school, I worshiped at a United Methodist church near the university. In one quadrennium, two of its laity were chosen as delegates to General Conference. During a discussion of church governance in an adult Sunday-school class at the church, someone indicated how unusual it was for a single congregation to have two delegates selected. “So most churches have only one?” asked a class member. “Most United Methodist churches have none!” came the correct reply. “And only a tiny minority of clergy ever get to attend!”

So, you are in elite company. There are more than 9 million lay members of our church around the world, and fewer than 500 of them will carry credentials as delegates to Cleveland. Fewer than 30,000 clergy are eligible for election at any given time, and fewer than 2 percent of them are chosen. Do not overlook the distinction that has been granted to you.

Moreover, you have been selected to participate in an experience quite unlike anything else in the world. To be sure, there are global assemblies larger than General Conference. There are gatherings that bring people together from many more countries than those where United Methodism claims to be present. There are representative bodies, such as international labor unions, whose convention delegates are chosen in local or regional elections, just like the selection process for delegates in our annual conferences. But to my knowledge none of the other groups is made up of a combination of representative and participative democracy, which is what a General Conference can claim to be.

A General Conference is truly a democratic assembly, a collection of equals, with no president or chair in control. The Conference itself makes its own rules, governs its own decisions, chooses its own agencies, and sets its own agenda. Yet it does so in connection with the whole church: with individuals who are members of local churches and are thereby also members of the entire connection; with all of the previous General Conferences; with the denomination’s Constitution; and with the annual conferences that are the basic units of the church.

As a delegate, you will be expected to make many decisions and cast many votes. But you will not be able to initiate anything new. You will actually be responding to the initiatives of others—boards, councils, conferences, committees, commissions, task forces, and individuals who have submitted petitions to the General Conference. You will have a role in accepting, amending, rejecting, or revising
what others have given to the delegates for action. To put it in another way, your days will be spent conferencing with the other delegates who are present, with the staff and visitors who have come to observe, and with the whole church from whom thousands of petitions have come.

You are going to be entrusted with legislative procedures to help you deal with those petitions. And your decisions will determine what tens of thousands of congregations and scores of annual conferences will be doing in their local administration, their sacramental ministries, their global mission, their financial planning, and their public witness. You are going to have a part in choosing the ways the church functions as a “connection,” through agencies of the general church, regional and jurisdictional bodies, ethnic and gender caucuses, and financial and programmatic support. You are going to help draft the disciplines that will determine who can be an ordained minister in the church; where the boundaries governing the behavior of clergy are drawn; and what individuals must achieve educationally and otherwise in order to be eligible for appointment or assignment to the ministries of the church. You are going to share in discerning how The United Methodist Church positions itself in relationship to other Christian bodies ecumenically. At the same time, you are going to face issues that could result not in reconciliation with other churches externally but rather in schism within United Methodism internally. And you are going with the knowledge that, whatever your gathering of nearly 1000 delegates decides, any or all of it can be undone by a future General Conference four years or 40 years from now.

Since you asked for suggestions or insights, I have compiled a “top-ten list” for you. It includes ten categories of the General Conference experience for which I would advise you to be ready.

**Number 10: Remember the Practicalities**

One of the memorable pieces of advice I received when I was getting ready for my first General Conference was to take along an empty suitcase. People who go on long trips often do that in order to transport the trinkets and souvenirs that they collect along the way. You may buy a tee shirt, a cassette tape, or a small item of jewelry in Cleveland. You will not need extra luggage to haul those few things.
But you will collect an amazing quantity of paper in the eleven days of the Conference.

You may think that in the months leading up to the Conference you have been swamped with official reports, lobbying letters, advocacy brochures, and campaign material on behalf of candidates for the episcopacy. But a tidal wave of documents will roll over you from the moment you arrive in Cleveland. Some of it will be ephemeral, and you will toss it into one of the (hopefully) ubiquitous recycling bins around the arena. However, some of it will be essential for you to accumulate and desirable for you to keep. Every morning, a copy of an official General Conference tabloid, called the *Daily Christian Advocate*, will land on your desk. It is the scorecard of the previous day’s activity, the billboard for the current day’s activity, the verbatim of earlier days’ debate, and the archive which historians will consult as long as United Methodism is studied in the distant future. Measure the thickness of the published pre-Conference material that you are supposed to read and take with you to Cleveland. Be prepared to bring it all, and at least an equal amount more, with you when you come home.

And that is only the paper. You will also have the opportunity to acquire free stuff, such as coffee mugs, umbrellas, and tote bags. All of it will compete for space in that empty suitcase you brought along when you are packing to head home in the early hours of Saturday, May 13.

One other practical thing to remember: Take some coins for the hotel laundromat (if yours has one). Unless you own (and want to carry with you to Cleveland) two weeks’ worth of clean clothes, you will have to do laundry at some point during the experience.

**Number 9: Endure the Pain**

Be prepared to endure at least two kinds of pain. The first is physical. The chairs provided for delegates at the tables for the plenary and in the conference rooms for legislative committees will be reasonably comfortable. But your body will hurt after a while: from sitting in the same position six or eight or ten or twelve hours each day; from lack of exercise; from too much hotel and restaurant food; from too little sleep.

The second kind of pain is spiritual. Your soul will experience
profound levels of pain as you encounter United Methodists from other parts of the nation and the world. You will learn about unspeakable suffering which the church must try, but is unable, to alleviate. You will meet people on opposite sides of a divisive issue, whose passion for their cause will touch your soul while tearing you in opposite directions. You will learn anew how painful are the struggles of ethnic-minority communities in the United States and national-church communities elsewhere in the world. You will experience the pain of guilt that comes with realizing how little you know about a particular justice issue, theological question, financial problem, or moral question—and yet you must decide instantaneously and cast a vote.

Number 8: Recognize the Politics

Keep in mind that as a cultural and social experience a General Conference is a lot more like a political convention than a prayer meeting. There will be worship, including some of the best preaching and finest music you will ever hear in your life. For example, delegates who attended the 1988 Conference in St. Louis can still remember a sermon by Bishop Woodie White as one of those rare moments when the Word of the Lord was spoken with power. But more than anything else, you will be an eyewitness to (and a participant in) ecclesiastical politics at the major-league level.

The first place you see it is in the organizing meeting of the legislative committee on which you serve. Political-action task forces that represent various regions, issues, caucuses, and agendas will have positioned themselves to get their candidates nominated and elected to the three offices in every legislative committee: chair, vice-chair, and secretary. The chair of a legislative committee holds a particularly visible office, because he or she presents the report of the committee on the floor of the plenary session of the Conference. Candidates for the episcopacy covet such a prominent role, because it allows them to be seen and it allows them to demonstrate their skills at presiding.

Another way that the political dimensions of General Conference are displayed is in the strategic use of floor locations by delegates during plenary debates. In some Conference sites, it becomes apparent that the lighting does not enable a presiding bishop to see all the way to the back row or into the corners of the room. Further, bishops will
offer the right of the floor to delegates in different sections of the room. Careful floor managers, therefore, will be sure to have effective speakers ready to advocate their point of view at various microphones around the room, in positions where they can be seen, so as to make certain that the strongest possible advocates for their side are poised to be heard. Floor managers also know the rules of the General Conference and the importance of a timely intervention to “move the previous question on all that is before us.”

You may be sitting in your chair, pondering whether to go to a microphone and offer something that is on your heart about an issue, only to realize that the parliamentary process has been politically controlled by others around you. They may feel just as deeply about the matter as you, but they are better organized in making sure others know it. You may find the political dimensions of the Conference frustrating. Do not let these immobilize you. Accept the politics as part of the culture of General Conference. Find ways to exercise the political life of the church in the service of discipleship. For example, one of my most engaging and stimulating General Conference experiences occurred when I helped form a group of delegates to advocate for a minority report on a specific piece of legislation. Recruiting supporters for the minority, scheduling late-night strategy sessions, and crafting the text of a minority resolution became a great example of “Christian conferencing.”

Number 7: Understand That Delegates Are Not Representative of the Church

Every General Conference deals with some significant issues of great importance to the whole church. But the delegates are never truly “representative” of the whole church. They are delegated by the annual conferences, yet they do not necessarily represent the culture or the priorities of those bodies.

Here is where the ideal image of the General Conference as representing the church has to be adjusted to reality. The delegates who are elected to General Conference are, by almost any frame of reference, not representative of United Methodism. The laity on average are older, better educated, and wealthier than the average layperson in the denomination. The clergy on average are older and wealthier than most pastors. Both groups are more ethnically diverse.
than the church as a whole. Relatively few laity who are employed in nonchurch positions can even consider becoming delegates to General Conference. A working farmer, a public-school teacher, a utility worker, a factory machinist, a self-employed plumber, a hairstylist, and many others in similar careers who routinely occupy our pews would have an extremely difficult time finding a way to arrange two weeks in Cleveland for a church meeting. Laity who can attend are more likely to be business people who can rely on a staff to run their organizations, or they are professionals who can schedule vacations in the spring. Many others are academicians who can make special arrangements for their research and classes, or unemployed persons, retirees, and others with sufficient financial wherewithal to spend a couple of weeks away from work.

In most quadrennia, approximately 40 percent of the delegates to General Conference are first-timers. The other 60 percent are veterans of ecclesiastical operations. This latter group includes a class of perpetual Conference goers, or what might be called “professional volunteers.” These are the clergy and laity who spend much of their energy attending church meetings at the district, conference, middle-judicatory, national, and international levels. Sometimes they do so not because of a commitment to serve but because of a desire to be seen in what appears as a leadership role. They enjoy the fellowship and the travel, especially when it comes at the denomination’s expense.

Number 6: Beware of Parochialism and Provincialism

If individual delegates sometimes fail to rise above their own egocentrism or self-interest, groups of people at General Conference find it even more difficult to escape from their own parochialism. Staff members of general-church agencies roam the arena and observe the legislative committees, looking for any sign that their agency might be under criticism—or worse, face cuts in budget or programming responsibilities. Organized delegations from certain jurisdictions will exult with joy or sigh with despair over the number of their candidates for office in the legislative committees that were or were not elected. Caucuses will regularly contact the delegates who represent their constituencies to guide their voting patterns, debating points, or committee roles. Bishops, meanwhile, will try to stay aloof from it all
but will quietly try to comfort the fearful from their own annual conferences or the general agencies over which they preside.

All of this indicates the parochial conduct that will mark much of the legislative activity within a General Conference. It will be tempting for you as a delegate to inquire of your friends within your own delegation how a certain legislative proposal will affect your conference. It may be a proposed change in the legislative formula by which episcopal areas are created in jurisdictions. ("Would that force us to share a bishop with another annual conference?") It may be an alteration in the method by which the size of the delegation is calculated. ("We should support this, since it would add two more to our delegation!") It may be a change in choosing certain mission projects. ("If this passes, the place in which our conference missionary serves will get less money!")

The parochialism can also surface around an issue, rather than around geography. In 1992, opponents of abortion managed to guide a petition to the plenary session near the very end of the Conference. Broadly and vaguely worded, it would have prohibited any church funds from being provided to a health-care institution that performs abortions. While the parochial interests of abortion opponents might have been served by such legislation, it would hardly have been in the interests of the whole church. In fact, it could have threatened the well-being of some. Many of our United Methodist congregations are in small communities, where health-care providers are few. If the sole hospital in a rural county provides a full range of health-care services, including abortion, the proposed legislation could have meant that active and retired clergy in the county who use an annual-conference health-insurance program would be prevented from receiving benefits if they sought care at that hospital. This proposal had to be stopped, and it was!

5. Follow the Money

In any organization, the easiest decisions to reach are those that have no obligations attached; the easiest positions to support are those that do not cost anything, and the simplest way to stop a program is to cut off its supply of money. The General Conference clearly qualifies as such an organization. One of the principal actions to be taken by the Conference will be the adoption of a budget for the coming
quadrennium, with a number of legislative attachments related to it. By what formula will the general-church budget be apportioned to the annual conferences? What figure will be used to set the apportionment for the Ministerial Education Fund, which supports theological education? Which mission projects will have funding through the general boards, and which ones will be channeled through advance specials?

Likewise, General Conference can debate all sorts of legislative proposals regarding candidacy for, and entry into, the ordained ministry. However, the budget decisions are the ones that will determine how many dollars flow directly to which seminaries; how many dollars will be distributed at the discretion of annual-conference boards; and how many dollars will be available for students to spend at the college, university, or seminary of their choice.

The General Conference can discuss with passion the crises in health care and education for children. However, it is the financial priorities that will determine whether the church is going to do more than engage in posturing on such things. People can make speeches on the floor of the General Conference about why the church ought to support certain initiatives in missions, such as health care and education. The real issue, though, is whether these same people can enable their annual conferences, their local churches, and themselves to rise above pettiness, regional parochialism, and cynicism about ecclesiastical politics to deliver the dollars to the project.

Some people are more than eager to link the dollars with the delegates. Under the current legislation in The Book of Discipline, the size of an annual-conference delegation is determined by the number of clergy and lay members in the annual conference. A widely circulated proposal would alter that and set the size of the delegation according to the size of the World-Service apportionment.

To understand United Methodism at a General Conference, follow the money.

4. Give and Receive Pastoral Care

No doubt the people of Cleveland will do everything possible to exercise the gift of hospitality. Like previous General Conferences, the Conference in Cleveland will deploy a battalion of volunteers who will have beverages, cookies, and other refreshments steadily
available. They are eager to be gracious hosts, and you can find many ways to express gratitude. Attending worship at a local church in the city on Sunday morning is one way to strengthen your connection with them and acknowledge their care for you.

Another group of volunteers that will care for your needs in a significant way is the squadron of "pages." These clergy and laity will have come to Cleveland at their own expense to participate in the Conference as observers and as support personnel. They will deliver messages and distribute materials among the delegates. Should you rise to some legislative occasion, be recognized at a microphone, and offer a motion or an amendment on the floor, a page will draw near and hand you a triplicate form, so you can write the text of your motion for the Conference secretary. As General Conference draws to a close, an offering will be taken for the pages as a way of helping them cover a portion of their travel and residential expenses. Be generous.

Bishops will need pastoral care as well. They are treated rather curiously by the General Conference. On the one hand, they process in episcopal dignity for the opening Communion service. They present (through one member of the Council of Bishops) a collective "episcopal address" on the state of the church. They have a special conference room reserved for their use as a council; and they occupy seats of honor on the dais at the front of the Conference venue. On the other hand, they are not allowed to speak on the floor of the General Conference unless the body votes to permit them. They can present a report only if they chaired a committee that has a channel to the General Conference. They preside over certain sessions of the plenary only if asked by a committee on presiding officers to do so. And they certainly have no vote.

Therefore, unless an individual bishop is scheduled to preside, asked to preach, or expected to give a report, there is nothing for our episcopal leaders at General Conference to do. As they sit in front of the plenary, they may need something to occupy their interest. If you have bought a book that one of them has written, send it up (by means of a page) and ask the bishop to autograph it. Or circulate your General Conference hymnal through the whole Council of Bishops, and see how many of their signatures you can obtain.

There is one more category of persons for whom you might exercise pastoral care: the alternate delegates from your annual conference. They will attend, but they cannot sit as voting delegates or
participate in plenary debate unless you as a delegate arrange to yield your seat for a full morning, afternoon, or evening session. Talk with others in your delegation about a method to seat everyone, including the clergy and lay alternates. During the session or the day that you step aside for an alternate, you may find a way to rediscover the real world outside of the Conference as a place for ministry.

3. Seize a Moment to Be Prophetic

Some General Conferences meet at a time when it is obvious that the word of the Lord must be spoken on some great issue of justice, righteousness, or peace. The Conference in 1968 that formed The United Methodist Church, for instance, met literally in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. This Conference voted to end the Central Jurisdiction and to establish a General Commission on Religion and Race. Each quadrennium, for more than 30 years, the General Conference has been asked to address the issue of homosexuality. On some occasions, a prophetic word is uttered after careful planning, astute politicking, legislative preparation, and public demonstration. On other occasions, a crisis erupts somewhere in the world while the Conference is in session.

Sometimes General Conferences are sensitive to their contexts, but sometimes they lose their bearings. Isolated in a convention center for long hours, insulated from the normal rhythms of life, a General Conference can become an experience which creates its own artificial environment. Someone has observed that, if you take a thousand people with little or no reason for being together except being selected to attend, put them in a strange location, deprive them of sleep, control their access to outside media, and feed them too many carbohydrates, strange things are bound to happen! One can forget the world outside the ecclesiastical walls, even if they are formed by the bare concrete of an urban civic center. Protect yourself from such harmful consequences by looking for opportunities to be prophetic.

If you plan ahead, you may find that there is an urban mission worth visiting in the vicinity of the Conference center. As you move from hotel to restaurant to Conference center, engage some of the local people in conversation. Learn what is happening in the city. Listen to the voices of those who come from other countries, other regions of this country, other ethnic groups, or other social classes.
Imagine ways that the church can escape from the sterile confines of denominational politics and speak a word to the world that God has so loved and for which God's only Son was sent with a message of eternal life. And do whatever you can, perhaps in evening or morning devotions with your annual-conference delegation, to be alert for the movement of the Spirit and the word of the Lord speaking to—as well as through—the Conference.

2. Become Theologically Proactive

One of the problems with General Conferences is that they are not structured to do their true, vital, and most important work. To be sure, a General Conference is a legislative body. But the legislation it produces and the processes it uses are not theologically neutral. All too frequently, the end result of General Conference activity is a provision in *The Book of Discipline* that is dogmatically muddled, doctrinally incoherent, or theologically confused. Assertions can be made in legislative-committee discussions or in plenary debates that boldly go where no Wesleyan theology has ever gone before. To the speaker and to many listeners, the words may sound “creative,” while, in fact, they may be merely novel. The trouble is that neither the plenary nor the committee is constituted as a theological conversation. Rather, the Conference follows parliamentary rules and legislative mechanisms.

A good (if trite) example occurred in one General Conference which I attended when a colleague and I kept score of the number of times advocates for a certain report would assert that “we have worked long and hard on this matter.” Clearly, the heresy of “works righteousness” prevails where quantities of time and effort expended are supposed to signify the presence of theological truth!

A better (if more subtle) example is the fact that for John Wesley Christian conferencing is one of the means of grace. You could perform a significant service to all of United Methodism by finding ways to enable the Cleveland gathering to engage in Christian conferencing. Such conferencing may be in the form of a motion (admittedly a parliamentary act) in your legislative committee to divide the group of 95 voting delegates into 10 covenant groups who would spend the first hour of each day in studying nonlegislative theological texts, praying for people outside of the Conference venue,
and confessing how it is with their souls. It may be in the form of a theological glossary that is distributed to the delegates as they enter the arena, inviting them to think theologically about the language being used and doctrines being taught by the legislation being considered. It might be in the form of a journal, which you and a few others could finance and ask alternate delegates or guests to help produce, tracking and commenting on the theological dimensions of arguments made during committee or plenary debate.

I. Expect That It Will Be Puzzling

At some point during your General Conference experience, you will awaken to the realization that you are one piece of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle and that you have no grasp of the whole. Despite your careful attention to reading the “Advance Edition” of the Daily Christian Advocate and your diligence in tracking the petition numbers and calendar item numbers that appear in each morning’s Daily Christian Advocate, you will lose track of the petition number that corresponds to a given calendar item number. You will need an administrative assistant to tell you what, exactly, is on the consent calendar. You will need a staff grammarian to “ungarble” some of the motions, amendments, and substitutes that arise on the floor. You will need an interpreter to translate some of the jargon and acronyms that ecclesiastical insiders utter.

As a result, you will begin to be unsure of yourself—not only about what you feel regarding an item before the Conference but also about what exactly the item is that is before the Conference. You will be puzzled that one presiding bishop seems to permit something in plenary debate, while another seems to prohibit it. You will wonder whether anybody is really keeping track of all the shifting language in amendments that are offered from the floor and accepted by the chair of a reporting committee. You will be mystified by how a crowd of a 1000 delegates can become obsessive over something that seems ultimately unimportant but be indifferent toward something that strikes you as profound and critical. You will ponder whether the bishops should remain silenced, whether the Judicial Council should be consulted, or whether certain delegates should be told that they have already been to the microphones too often.

And, when it is all over, you will hope that your peers will elect you
to come back again, because you believe next time you will understand General Conference better. Congratulations on the good news about your election!

Sincerely,
Bill Lawrence

Notes

1. See, for example, my article "Has Our Theology of Ordained Ministry Changed?" in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 151-67.
Several weeks before the General Conference of 1992 in Louisville, I received a telephone call from Dr. Helmut Nausner, Superintendent of The United Methodist Church in Austria. Dr. Nausner is an old friend who, during that quadrennium, was serving both as a member of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the Commission for the Study of Ministry. He wanted to know if I would agree to be nominated to chair the legislative committee dealing with ordained and diaconal ministry. I was hesitant to accept the assignment; for I, too, was serving on the Commission for the Study of Ministry and knew that the report coming to the General Conference was controversial. Dr. Nausner argued that the legislative committee needed a person experienced at chairing complex meetings. He told me that he had taken counsel with a number of colleagues in Europe and in the United States and had also spoken with members of the Board and staff members of the Board—they all wanted to know if I would chair the committee.

Dennis M. Campbell, Headmaster of Woodberry Forest School, Woodberry Forest, Virginia, was Dean of Duke Divinity School and Professor of Theology from 1982 to 1997. He serves as President of the University Senate. Among his books are *Who Will Go for Us? An Invitation to Ordained Ministry* and *The Yoke of Obedience: The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism.*
Dr. Nausner argued that the chair of the legislative committee on ordained ministry must be someone who knows the tradition, is open to new ideas, is scrupulously fair in presiding over the debate, and has credibility with the General Conference. After extensive discussion I agreed to the nomination. After that decision I did nothing more until the day General Conference opened in Louisville on Tuesday, May 5, 1992. Others, however, I later learned, worked to canvas delegates in order to influence the election on my behalf.

The Setting for Legislation

The General Conference is a legislative body comprised of delegates from the annual conferences throughout the world whose representation is established by a formula. In the latter part of the twentieth century the number of delegates at a General Conference has been about 1,000.

It is impossible for a legislative body of 1,000 delegates, assembled at tables on the floor of a huge convention center in a major city, to have meaningful debate on any significant matter. The setting is not conducive to careful work. In addition to floor space large enough to hold a large platform, on which the bishops sit, along with the secretaries and program participants, and tables and chairs for 1,000 delegates, there must be room for official observers, guests, and the public. The Conference feels more like a political convention than a serious deliberative body. For most delegates the setting is intimidating. The persons who talk on the floor tend to be those who have been to General Conference many times, who are known by the presiding officer, and who are experienced public speakers.

The thousands of proposals that come to the General Conference are called "petitions." These may come from boards, agencies, local churches, annual conferences, or individuals. United Methodists hold to an old tradition that any United Methodist may directly petition the General Conference. Petitions include every conceivable proposal for the life and work of The United Methodist Church, including some dealing with theology and doctrine. The only way that the General Conference can handle all the petitions that come before it is to have smaller units work through the proposed legislation before it comes to the floor, so that once it comes to the floor the amount of discussion can be kept to a minimum.
Legislative committees are the small units designed to accomplish this end. There are numerous committees, most of which mirror the structure of boards and agencies of the church. Thus, there are committees on finance, higher education, church and society, and all the many other concerns of the church. There are also committees that deal with technical matters, such as pensions. And there are committees established to deal with matters that come before the General Conference because of action of the previous General Conference. For instance, the 1988 General Conference had received the report of a ministry study commission but had not adopted it; however, the Conference decided to continue the commission into the new quadrennium. The report of this commission was to go to the legislative committee on ordained and diaconal ministry, the very committee about which Dr. Nausner called me.

Constituting the Legislative Committee

Membership of the legislative committees is established ahead of the opening of General Conference. At the meeting of the annual conferences prior to the General Conference (this happens in May or June prior to the meeting of the General Conference in May of the following calendar year), clergy and lay delegates are elected to serve in the General Conference.

These elections take place by secret Roman ballot, an election process that involves no prior nomination but only a blank ballot on which the elector is instructed to write a certain number of names. This is the kind of ballot used by the College of Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church when it is necessary to elect a new pope. The idea in church history is that such a ballot allows for the greatest possibility for the Holy Spirit to work directly through the electors. This is the same process used to elect bishops in the Methodist churches. Whatever one may make of the history of papal elections, or of elections to the Methodist episcopacy, it is clear that in recent elections for delegates to General Conference extensive campaigning goes on ahead of time.

Most annual conferences now witness elaborate political efforts by groups and caucuses to elect certain delegates—usually in regard to particular issues, such as abortion or homosexuality. When I was elected in 1983 to go to General Conference for the first time (to be
held in 1984), no advance campaigning took place. The fact that I was
Dean of the Divinity School of Duke University was significant, but I
don't think determinative. Many seminary deans are not elected. I did
not, however, talk to anyone ahead of time and, as far as I know, was
not on any list. By the last round of elections, for the General
Conference of 2000, I think it would have been impossible in my
annual conference for anyone to get elected who did not appear on
certain lists. That is now true in most, if not all, annual conferences.
The time when a delegate can get elected because of general respect
or judgment that he or she would be a good contributor is over.

Now the political process is very visible. You either play the game
with a vengeance or you don't get elected. Once the delegation of an
annual conference is elected, internal politics take over within the
delegation. Among the issues to be decided is choosing the chair of
the delegation; whether or not the annual conference is going to
support one of its own for the episcopacy; and on which General
Conference legislative committees individual delegates will serve. In
most delegations the process is simple. Delegates get to choose the
legislative committee according to the order of their election to the
delegation. What this means is that expertise may or may not play any
role at all in the composition of the legislative committee. Conversely,
it may mean that a given legislative committee includes mainly people
who have a particular interest in the topic at hand. This is a complex
issue not easily resolved, but it is a problem. Legislative committees
are generally not representative of the General Conference as a whole.
Because of the way they are selected, they tend to include persons
already immersed in the details of the material or people who know
nothing whatsoever about the material.

On the first day of General Conference each legislative committee
has an organizing meeting. The organizing session is presided over by
one of the bishops whose job it is to call the group to order and to
conduct the election of a chair and a secretary. From that point on the
chair presides and makes all arrangements for the committee to
accomplish its work. A legislative committee has the authority to
reject a petition or pass it on to a plenary session of the General
Conference. It may also “bundle” petitions that have to do with the
same topic and create a new coherent proposal that addresses the
issues of many individual petitions. The committee may decide that
the intent of a particular petition is covered by another and choose the
one that best suits the overall needs of the church. Each of the
thousands of petitions received is heard by a legislative committee. No petition is ignored, and I am impressed with the seriousness with which most General Conference delegates take the process of hearing every petition. Each committee must nevertheless reduce the number of petitions, so that the entire General Conference receives only those petitions that, in the committee's judgment, seem wise and practical. The General Conference then must adopt or reject the committee reports.

Committees at Work

In the first General Conference that I attended, I served on the legislative committee on higher education. A small amount of material of relatively little importance came before that committee. Church-related higher education is not on the front burner for most Methodists anymore. The committee moved through the petitions quickly and was finished in just a couple of days. In my second General Conference, in St. Louis in 1988, I was a member of the legislative committee on finance. Its proceedings were dominated by a small number of clergy and lay delegates who had given many years to the topic and who were already members of the General Council on Finance and Administration. They were the ones who had developed the proposed budget for the denomination for the following quadrennium and were, therefore, able to parry every inquiry and move forward with firmness. Although there was an effort to put a cap on the budget, the overwhelming sense of the legislative committee was one of business as usual. There was no desire to hear from the churches, no willingness to allow members of the committee who were not already on the inside to divert the process from approval. There was some justification for this. It was, after all, necessary for The United Methodist Church to adopt a budget, and it had to take action within a set amount of time. No real change is likely to come out of a legislative committee where the materials under debate are very complicated and enormously important.

It makes a great deal of difference on which legislative committee a delegate serves. The work of some committees is routine and easy; consequently, they finish early. Other committees are methodical, conclude on time, and report without too much debate. Some committees are very politicized and demand an extraordinary amount
of time, energy, and emotional and spiritual discipline. Such committees take a significant toll on the chair, as well as the members, and may result in "floor fights." Such fights are relatively rare at General Conference because, as I indicated earlier, the floor is too big to allow for much creative debate. It is the case, however, that the only place for a delegate to speak on a matter that was not before his or her own legislative committee is on the floor of the General Conference.

The chairs of the legislative committees meet every morning (usually at 7:30 A.M.) to evaluate the progress of the several committees and to plan the order of what will come to the floor. These meetings allow the chairs to judge the mood and tenor of the General Conference, to share their thinking about their own committee, and to see how their work is fitting into the overall agenda. The administrative directors of the General Conference, including the Secretary and the General Secretary, attend this meeting, so that they can determine the order of the legislative sessions to keep the General Conference moving on schedule, as much as possible.

The problem, of course, is that the Conference can be hijacked by special-interest groups. Because United Methodists tend to be polite, one delegate concerned about a particular topic or inspired by a current event, can cause the entire Conference to get seriously off schedule. A good specific example of this was the attention given to the Los Angeles riots in 1992 after an impassioned plea by a delegate from Southern California. This example raises an interesting dilemma. The topic was vital, and the church did create empowerment zones as a result. But one wonders how essential it was to spend as much of the Conference’s time on the issue.

An Experience as Chair

In 1992, when I chaired the legislative committee on ordained and diaconal ministry, most of the delegates on the committee were deeply involved and invested in the proposed legislation, having chosen the committee for just that reason. This meant that they knew a lot about the material; it also meant that they represented very specific points of view. The Commission for the Study of Ministry was bringing to the General Conference a series of recommendations having to do with ordained and diaconal ministry. There was strong disagreement between members of the committee. The main point of contention had
to do with whether or not diaconal ministers—laypersons consecrated to ministries of education, music, or administration—should be ordained. The nature of education required for ordination was a major issue. Should graduate, professional theological education be required for ordination? Also at stake was the question of whether ordained ministry in United Methodism required being an itinerant minister under appointment by the bishop. It seemed to many committee members that the proposal to ordain deacons but not have them itinerate involved changing significantly the Wesleyan conception of ministry.

The Christmas Conference of 1784, at which the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed, established an ordained ministry that included deacons and elders under the appointment of a superintendent (later called "bishop"), following guidelines sent to America by John Wesley. It was clear from the beginning that ordained ministry in Methodism was appointed, sent, and itinerant. There was no place for the "call system" in the Methodist understanding of ministry. The historic tradition of American Methodism includes two orders of ordained ministry, deacons and elders, and three offices: deacon, elder, and bishop. The bishop is an elder who is set aside for the ministry of superintendency. In the Wesleyan tradition all ordained ministers are itinerant, bishops included. The lay ministries of the church are not less important, but they are different. They take multiple forms, including some laypersons who may hold paid positions in the life of the church. Lay ministries have always held a vital place in Methodism.

Those in 1992 who sought to change the church's ministerial order insisted that it was unfair for consecrated lay ministers of the church (known as "diaconal ministers") not to have the same rights and privileges as the ordained, especially in regard to job security and benefits. The Commission for the Study of Ministry that reported to the 1992 General Conference brought a document that included legislation to change the pattern of ministry in The United Methodist Church.

The legislative committee met on Tuesday afternoon, May 5, for its organizational session. My name was placed into nomination along with two other names, and I was duly elected. Professor Mary Elizabeth Moore (then at Claremont School of Theology), herself a diaconal minister, was elected secretary. Professor Moore and I
worked closely together throughout the General Conference to carry out the work of the legislative committee.

We proceeded to deal with the report of the Commission for the Study of Ministry and its proposed legislation. After extensive debate, the legislative committee voted not to accept the report of the Commission. It then proceeded with an effort to write legislation in the committee for adoption by the General Conference. A majority coalition of committee members did not like the Commission's report and was able to vote it down. Some did not like it because they were concerned about the change from the traditional understanding of ordained ministry in Methodism. Others opposed it because they thought it did not go far enough to change the traditional order by creating a permanent deacon. These persons sought two ordained orders, an elder and a deacon, in which the diaconate would no longer be a step toward elder's orders but an office unto itself. The elder would be appointed by the bishop and would be itinerant; the deacon would be called by the congregation and appointed by the bishop but would not itinerate. In the end, a majority of the committee favored the more radical plan and proceeded to send such a proposal to the General Conference. This required the scrapping of the Commission's report and its replacement with altogether new material generated in the legislative committee.

The effort on the part of the legislative committee to write completely new legislation on such a complicated issue became almost impossible. The committee was trying to do in a few days what commissions had sought to do for years. The result was almost around-the-clock meetings. The legislative committee struggled late into the night to produce language that could go to the General Conference proposing a whole new ordering of ministry. The workload for the secretary was extraordinary, requiring endless hours of tedious effort to bring petitions into order.

The worst part of the legislative committee process resulted from the high emotions represented in the room. Members of the Commission for the Study of Ministry were upset because the legislative committee had thrown out their work. Members who represented the position of the Division of Ordained Ministry, who were in the minority, were frustrated because every time they expressed an opinion or sought to pass a motion, they were voted down. Those who favored the proposed new orders were frustrated because they thought the rest of the committee was not sufficiently
helpful and supportive. To try to chair the session was almost impossible. We spent hours and hours in debate followed by efforts to write legislation. Proposed legislation passed the committee with consistently small majorities. The committee was badly split and many members were deeply resentful. My effort to be fair was challenged at every turn. It was a situation in which there was no solution because the alternatives were so sharply stated.

Finally the proposed new legislation came to the floor of the General Conference from the legislative committee. After a marathon session, the effort failed. It was clear to many on the floor of the Conference that a proposal so sweeping needed more time for careful review. One example is the question of how the new deacon would be included in the pension plan of the church. There was no clarity about exactly how that would work or what it would cost, and there was no way to get that information while the General Conference was in session. In the end, the General Conference voted to leave things as they were and to refer the issue of ministry to the Council of Bishops. Many previous efforts at studying ministry in The United Methodist Church had failed. Perhaps the only way forward was to ask the bishops to look at the whole matter and make some recommendations in the future.

Afterthoughts

What did I learn about the legislative process and the role of the chair of the legislative committee? One learning is that a person needs to be careful about the nature of the committee before he or she agrees to chair it. Some committees are very straightforward and uncontroversial. Other committees are controversial to the point where division is so great that no chair can smooth the way for a process that results in good feelings, let alone agreement. Another learning is that legislative committees may not be the best way for some things to come to the church. By their very nature, legislative committees work by debate and voting.

There are winners and losers, both of whom have large stakes in the future. There are some matters that, for the good of the church, do not lend themselves to such processes.
Norman E. Dewire

General Agencies at General Conference

Just look at all the staff members from the general agencies! Many delegates to any General Conference will voice, or at least strongly feel, this sentiment. What are these general-agency staff members doing here? What are they really doing here? This thought is both positive and negative.

The General Secretary as “Staff”

You actually can see the general secretaries of the general agencies during the General Conference. It is not so easy to see the staff, and some members, of the general agencies, since they sit in the visitors’ section of the gallery. One table is reserved on the back row behind one section of delegates for the general secretaries of the fourteen general agencies. The general secretaries are ex-officio members of the General Conference and cannot vote; their purpose and their location at the Conference is to discharge their responsibilities. Their location gives them total access to the floor of the General Conference. They

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may address the delegates, at any time, by getting the attention of the presiding officer. When a general secretary speaks, it is to give information to the delegates as a matter is being considered.

I served as General Secretary of the General Council on Ministries of The United Methodist Church for almost twelve years. As a staff person I considered myself to be part of the "civil service" of the denomination. Every organization needs staff. The larger the organization, the greater the need for civil servants, that is, specialized staff.

From time to time one of the general secretaries is elected a voting delegate to the General Conference. This dual role leads to confusion. Once, as a reserve delegate, I tried to sit both as a general secretary and as a voting delegate from West Ohio. It did not work! The general secretaries are seated on the back row for a reason. When a general secretary sits as a voting delegate, that agency’s spot is vacant at the back table (unless an alternate member of the staff has been credentialed to sit there).

The General Agency in United Methodism

*The Book of Discipline* states:

> Connectionalism is an important part of our identity as United Methodists. It provides us with wonderful opportunities to carry out our mission in unity and strength. We experience this connection in many ways... General agencies, in particular, are important to our common vision, mission, and ministry.1

As United Methodists, we believe that the congregation is the place in the connection where the gospel of Jesus Christ is either heard or not heard. The congregation is where the “rubber hits the road” and the gospel of Jesus Christ is believed or not believed. It is within and through the congregation that the gospel is lived out or hidden. It is in and through the congregations of The United Methodist Church that the witness of Jesus Christ is carried forth in communities around the world.

Within our United Methodist connection levels of connection exist beyond the congregation in order to help the congregation be a faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The work of districts, annual conferences, jurisdictions, and the general church is done to assist...
congregations. In addition to assisting congregations in carrying out their mission, general agencies are charged to provide "essential services and ministries beyond the scope of individual local congregations and annual conferences through services and ministries that are highly focused, flexible, and capable of rapid response."

There are human conditions that can be met only by general agencies. There are programs of witness and service that are conducted by and through general agencies as they represent the gospel of Jesus Christ and all of the congregations of The United Methodist Church. It is this knowledge and these experiences that the general agencies properly bring to the General Conference.

Within The United Methodist Church, there are two councils established by the Constitution of The United Methodist Church. These two are the Council of Bishops and the Judicial Council. Since they are constitutional in origin, it would take a constitutional amendment to eliminate either the Council of Bishops or the Judicial Council.

The General Conference creates all other general agencies. During the session of any General Conference, any of the 14 general agencies can be dissolved or restructured. The General Conference can also create a new general agency if it chooses. It was the 1972 General Conference that adopted our present expression of polity and the present structure of general agencies. Since then, at two separate times, the General Conference has created a new general agency: the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns and the General Commission on United Methodist Men.

A Reporting Relation

Each of the general agencies reports and is amenable to the General Conference. Between sessions of the General Conference, the general program agencies are accountable to the General Council on Ministries. They account for receipts and expenditures of funds to the General Council on Finance and Administration. Each of the general agencies—whether a council, board, or commission—reports to the General Conference.

Each general agency submits written reports to the General Conference as part of the Advance Daily Christian Advocate to allow delegates to read about the services and ministries that these agencies have carried out during the previous quadrennium. Each agency
presents recommendations to the General Conference, again printed in advance. Each general agency has information to share with the delegates and has a stake in what happens at the General Conference!

We come now to the inner workings of the General Conference as seen from the perspective of the general secretaries and the members and staff of the general agencies. In order to fulfill their responsibilities and furnish information to the General Conference, these chief executives must have members of their staff present. Staff members, who have expertise within a particular field, work as civil servants with one or more specialized topics. In some instances, the general agencies feel that voting members of the general agency should be present to augment the knowledge and work of the staff during the General Conference. So, a large number of staff and members of the general agencies are present. It is my view that the larger the general agency, the more dependent the general secretary is on staff, and the more overlap there is with other agencies.

The Agencies and the Work of General Conference

The General Conference is the highest legislative body of The United Methodist Church. The staffs of the general agencies are the civil servants. At the General Conference, then, these general agencies, their general secretaries, and their staff need to be present in order to share information and speak to the proposed recommendations for their work in the next quadrennium.

Since the General Conference is a legislative body, the daily work for the General Conference is like any other legislative body in the world. A great deal of behind-the-scene work is done before and while votes are taken by the general agencies, caucus groups, special-interest groups, interested delegates, and visitors. In the best sense, this is how a democracy works! Groups with a vested interest in an issue speak their mind in the form of leaflets to the delegates, speeches in committee hearings, conversations with delegates in the hall, and written notes to delegates before and as they vote. The general agencies use all of the above! And so do many other individuals and groups. A delegate will be barraged with literature seeking to inform and influence his or her vote. The general agencies will work both visibly in this process and behind the scenes in ways that are not easily observed.
The General Conference, although it is a deliberative and legislative body, is still an expression of God’s Holy Spirit at work. We United Methodists believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the General Conference just as the Holy Spirit is at work in congregations and in the lives of individual United Methodists. The General Conference is an event, in time and space, that listens to the collected wisdom of delegates, discerns what God’s Spirit would have the denomination do, and then records this collected wisdom by voting. Those votes reflect the collected wisdom of that particular General Conference. The results of the votes constitute the next edition of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. As soon as the votes are taken and the General Conference adjourns, new wisdom emerges. The work of the Holy Spirit is never finished or complete!

General agencies have experience in being organized. As a general secretary, I had staff members with specialized information. We cultivated networks of interested persons. We had a secretarial pool, office and communications equipment, and a budget to support our work. We had elected members who determined the policies and programs of the agency. And so we went to the General Conference prepared to represent our essential services and ministries as part of the connection known as The United Methodist Church. Through our reports, we brought our best wisdom to General Conference. We wanted the General Conference to adopt our recommendations, since they were created, we believed, in the best interest of The United Methodist Church and were consistent with the mission of our general agency.

Each general agency files a written report to the General Conference. It proposes recommendations for its own work in the next quadrennium and studies the legislation offered by others that affect its own work and recommendations. Each general agency develops a tracking system for legislation, in whatever legislative committee that affects its life, service, and ministry. The numbers assigned to reports and recommendations aid this tracking process. Staff and/or members sitting in the visitors’ section monitor progress on each piece of legislation.

**General Conference and the Agencies’ Work**

During the first week of meetings of the legislative committees, general-agency staffs are in the various meeting rooms to observe all
legislation that relate to that agency. If appropriate and recognized, the staff will speak to a section of a legislative committee or to the full committee. The general secretary is expected to be present in the legislative committee that most relates to the work of that general agency and is often invited to speak to the legislative committee. The officers of the legislative committee often consult the general secretary.

At times during each day, the staff (and members) of the general agency will compare notes about how reports and recommendations are “tracking” through legislative committees. If there is need for input to a legislative committee, the staff send notes to delegates in a legislative committee, offering advice about what needs to be said in order to move ahead on a report or recommendation.

When these petitions (reports and recommendations) come as calendar items to the floor of the General Conference for debate, discussion, and decision, once again the staffs of the general agencies are at work behind the scenes. The same is true of other groups and of each special-interest group! When a calendar item needing special support or modification has been identified, staff members of the general agencies send notes to delegates as a special alert. These notes are sent, via pages and ushers, to the desks of delegates. If there is time, staff members visit with delegates during breaks in the plenary sessions. They telephone delegates at night in their hotel rooms. In these ways, information is shared, so that a particular report can move ahead.

Resourcing or Controlling?

The General Conference has a reason to seat the general secretaries on the floor of the General Conference, giving them ex officio, nonvoting status with the right to speak. The General Conference has a proper and rightful expectation that the general secretaries and their staffs and members will be resourceful to the General Conference.

Some delegates and observers will see the work of the general secretaries and the staff and members of general agencies as resourceful. After all, it is the general agencies that work on particular services and aspects of ministry during the quadrennium. The general agencies have given careful thought to reports and recommendations before they bring these to the General Conference for deliberation and decision.

Other delegates and observers will see the work of the general
secretaries and the staff and members of general agencies as manipulative and controlling. These delegates will see the impassioned speeches in support of the work of a general agency as biased. These same delegates likely will see the impassioned efforts of any caucus, special-interest group, or visitor as manipulative and controlling. For some, of course, only their particular impassioned speech, on their side of an issue or program, is the correct and only point of view that should be expressed.

The Agency as Creation of the General Conference

Since each general agency is amenable to the General Conference, it is the General Conference that defines the services and ministries of each agency. The General Conference receives the report of what each agency has done in the prior quadrennium; receives recommendations about what each agency wants to do in the next quadrennium; and then the General Conference makes the decision about the work and recommendations of that agency.

The General Conference, thus, defines the scope of services and ministries that the general agency will perform during the next quadrennium. The General Conference also determines the budget of each general agency. Furthermore, the General Conference can vote a general agency out of existence. If not, the general agency remains in existence for the next quadrennium. The General Conference decides any special projects or missional priorities, usually on the recommendation of a general agency.

The general agencies of The United Methodist Church have a responsibility to bring their best thinking, reports, and recommendations to the General Conference. The general agencies are highly organized, and they should be. They use this same organizational style wherever they work or in whatever service or ministry they engage. The General Conference is another venue for these organized efforts.

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church is a democratically based legislative body. It is at the General Conference that issues should be debated. The General Conference, with its assembled delegates, struggles to discern what is the work of the Holy Spirit at that time and place. I believe that a sense of balance usually
prevails on any particular issue. I believe that most delegates are keenly aware of the programs they authorize for the general agencies.

Having participated as a general secretary, I believe that in the midst of impassioned pleas and well-written reports the work of the Holy Spirit, for this time and place, will be discerned as guidance and covenant for The United Methodist Church in the next quadrennium.

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. If I had a magic wand with which to restructure the general agencies, I would create a dozen or so general agencies, each with the program scope of the current General Board of Church and Society or the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. These two general boards are programmatically focused enough to be manageable and to fulfill meaningful services and ministries. The larger two general boards are too large in program scope and the smaller general commissions are too small in program scope.

   A nonprogrammatic council would coordinate these dozen or so agencies, where a sense of the oneness of the body of Christ, through The United Methodist Church, can become a reality. We divide the work of service and ministry into a manageable and discrete collection of functions and then coordinate the work. The Council of Bishops is not intended to be a program agency and should not be expected to perform program-coordinating functions.
General Conference and the Media

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church is the denomination's top legislative body. Meeting every four years, the Conference includes nearly 1,000 delegates (and nearly that many alternates) from every regional judicatory of the denomination, within and outside of the United States. Their mission: to chart the course for the denomination's mission, life, and work for the coming four years. It is an imposing gathering, an interesting—and sometimes heady—amalgam of legislative debate, impassioned theological and ideological thundering, some interminable nitpicking, innovative worship and preaching, and bustling activity.

General Conference and the Fourth Estate

The assembly, which represents the interests of more than 9 million church members globally, is at times a big newsmaker in the secular media in the United States. Although mainstream religion is still largely ignored and misunderstood by the "Fourth Estate," the past 100 years of Methodist and forerunner bodies have been influential

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players in church and society. And the legislative spectacle of the denomination’s quadrennial assembly in particular has captured headlines. The reason for this is that while the United States—and churches in this country—has become increasingly diverse in views and voice, The United Methodist Church still offers a particularly accurate mirror image of the best and worst of our society. And the General Conference offers a glimpse of the internal workings of the “Great Society” in all its triumphs and shortcomings. Political and ideological views run the gamut, but the middle-of-the-road still steers our mammoth ship. People of color and white women have grown in visibility and influence, but the denominational power and purse are still controlled largely by white men. We acknowledge and declare our “global nature” but celebrate that nature only inasmuch as the seats of power, influence, and dominant language and worldview remain in the northwest hemisphere. Media and marketing (and local churches looking for members) pursue youth and young adults to shore up their numbers, but middle-aged and older adults still determine the priorities of most established congregations.

What Makes News?

Like the wider society, too, is the continuing scrutiny, ignorance, awe, envy, and admiration with which the news media view, report, and judge the work of the church. The United Methodist Church is the second largest of the mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States, and its General Conference continues to be a major draw for media. In my nearly 20 years as a junior press officer for United Methodist brass, I have met representatives from some of the biggest and most prestigious agencies in news media, almost always in relation to my work pertaining to General Conference. Not all Protestant bodies can claim such public interest in their legislative assemblies. For good or ill, Methodists make news.

The relationship of the General Conference to the news media has some interesting parallels. Although church bureaucrats would deny it, many media have about the same low level of understanding of General Conference and its significance as do many rank-and-file United Methodist members. Though it is a representative body of sorts, those elected as delegates and alternates—and those staff and other players at General Conference—seem by many to be very far
removed from the day-to-day lives of laity (and even pastors) in local congregations. How else to explain the celebrated gap (real or imagined) between the “liberal” bureaucracy and a more politically and theologically “conservative” grass-roots membership? How else to explain that a majority who move through the ranks to become delegates/power brokers at General Conference are long-time “church hobbyists,” as one retired United Methodist journalist calls them? They are committed church men and church women and have a zeal and stake in the future of the church; but they also have learned to work an extremely political system by “campaigning” (a dirty word among church folks who want to believe that the Holy Spirit is the only guide in denominational process) and beating out other “candidates” who may be equally zealous and committed but may lack the popular appeal needed to become an elected representative.

The distance between General Conference and the rank-and-file also comes from our need for “us” and “them” delineations, our desire to have “big brother” (or “big sibling”) for the politically correct) both to celebrate and to blame. General Conference is the body that sets and carries out our missional agenda, takes stands on pressing issues of the day and represents our corporate consciousness. For some congregations and members this missional and social arbiter speaks and acts so that we don’t have to. We can thus brag, “My church built the first private university in Zimbabwe,” with impunity because “our” General Conference studied and voted and made it so. That’s a “big brother” story we tell with pride. On the other hand, General Conference—and the general boards and agencies of the denomination designed to carry out the orders of General Conference—can also be the “big brother” we blame when affairs don’t go as we like. As a connectional body, The United Methodist Church pays for mission and administration out of one financial pot—World Service—the money for which is apportioned to local churches. Church money-watchers estimate that that fair-share amount for ministry and maintenance at the denominational level accounts for an average of only 3.8 cents of every dollar spent by a congregation. However, when local-church money gets tight, when we disagree with a General Conference stance on a social or political issue, when we don’t like the bishop in our area, or when something else about the church—at any level—doesn’t suit us, we grass-roots United Methodists often resort to complaining about how the bureaucracy (read: General Conference and churchwide agencies) are taking more
and more of our hard-earned dollars and throwing them away on foolish, unchurchlike stuff. The truth, however, is that The United Methodist Church is one of the most financially resourceful, responsible, and accountable nonprofit conglomerates in the world. Less than 4 percent of our income is spent on administration—not many of the most widely hawked “feed-Maria-for-cents-a-day” outfits can match those numbers.

Understanding the Grand Scale

Of course, another simple reason why General Conference is noteworthy for current-events watchers as well as media is the sheer size and magnitude of the operation, the dollars at stake, and the people represented. At the most recent General Conferences there were delegates from United Methodist judicatories in the United States, Africa, Europe, and the Philippines. In addition, affiliate bodies (including other Methodist churches) sent representatives. Along with persons staffing the General Conference—administration, clerical, operations, and support—and visitors, the number at Conference hovers between 3 and 4,000. And the resources to support such a mammoth operation are noteworthy. At the 1992 session, General Conference required:

• 70 tons of paper and enough ink to record an estimated 3 million words
• 800 tables and several thousand chairs
• access to nearly 50 separate telephone lines
• enough airplane seats to bring nearly 1,000 delegates, visitors, and staff from 40 countries (and send them back home)
• 240,000 cookies during coffee breaks
• about $3 million to cover basic costs

The Conference is a two-week gathering that operates much like the United States Congress. Petitions sent by grass-roots individuals, churches, and groups—and those sent by general agencies—are sorted and assigned by topic to one of 10 legislative committees. The first week committees review, revise, reject, and recommend petitions. Those that pass muster are forwarded to the plenary sessions that meet the second week.
Most of the time at General Conference is given over to legislative sessions—committee and plenary. However, because it is a church gathering, time is built in for things ecclesiastical. The Conference usually opens on Tuesday afternoon with a mammoth worship service, and that evening is given over to a state-of-the-church address—that is, the episcopal address, offered by a bishop named by the Council of Bishops. In 2000 that address will be given for the first time in history by a bishop from outside the United States, Emerito C. Nacpil of the Philippines. In recent years, because laity wanted equal time, the denomination’s National Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders has sponsored a contest to select a layperson to give her or his own state-of-the-church treatise.

Bishops, who serve as presiding officers without voice or vote at General Conference, showcase their oratory skills as preachers during daily worship services at Conference. Those sermons run from the interminable (the 1972 episcopal address ran more than two hours by some journalists’ accounts) to the divinely inspired (Bishop Woodie W. White’s 1988 address titled “I Could Have Danced All Night” was, in my opinion, worthy of insertion into the New Testament as one of the most joyous celebrations ever of the swept-away power of Christ’s love). Design of worship often centers around music, with an array of local and regional choirs from across the church performing. The 1996 General Conference included music from the Africa University choir and a haunting closing-night rendition of “Jesus Loves Me” by Cynthia Wilson, co-director of music and worship for that Conference and director of worship for the 2000 assembly.

What Long-Time Church Press Journalists Recalled

Of all the historians, theologians, sociologists, church legislators, bishops, and staffers who have watched General Conference evolve through the years, perhaps the most knowledgeable—but least-consulted—group outside our own circles has been the press, particularly church-related press. In fact, the vast press coverage and wider interpretation of General Conference’s work that our denomination has enjoyed in public media have been largely due to the often-unheralded efforts of church media professionals.

The media and Methodism have long enjoyed an uneasy, creative relationship. The denomination has for at least 50 years championed a
"sunshine law," which espoused freedom of the press as a fundamental right and necessity of democratic society, not only United States-based understandings but global freedom of information. At the same time, however, church leaders have been among the most flagrant violators of the spirit of press freedom. The letter of church law stipulates that all meetings of the church be open to the media, except when dealing with personnel, money matters, or "third-party negotiations." As a press officer for now six General Conferences and countless other gatherings involving controversial actions, I can attest to the fact that almost any issue can be wedged into that protective triangle that shields it from being open to media scrutiny. A good case in point is the proceedings of the Judicial Council, the denomination's "supreme court." The high court deals with matters of church law, from whether or not an annual-conference policy on sexual harassment is legal from the standpoint of the *Book of Discipline* to whether or not a bishop has the right to take a specific action against a specific clergyperson.

At least up to recent times, the Judicial Council proceedings have been closed to the press. An exception has been to let the representative from the church's official press arm, United Methodist News Service, sit in during the proceedings for information only. However, News Service and the Judicial Council have a long-standing agreement that news will be released only after official action is taken. Although it is harder to maintain such strictures at General Conference, where church-press members share quarters—and information—with secular media representatives, attempts to control the flow of news have historically (and continue to) set some journalists' teeth on edge. It may also, says at least one retired church journalist, have kept press people—and their Methodist readers—from viewing General Conference as important and openly belonging to the masses.

"I never liked big meetings anyway—I don't guess most people do. But one of the things that really bugged me about covering General Conference as a press-corps member was that there was an attempt by too many church bureaucrats to control the news," said George Daniels, who retired in 1989 as executive editor of *New World Outlook*, a magazine produced by the denomination's mission arm, the General Board of Global Ministries in New York.

"There was a lot of manipulation of the press, especially those of us who are professional journalists who have worked for the church,"
Daniels recalled. In the 1950s he was on the staff of Together, a Methodist affinity magazine; and he wrote an article about a General Conference clergy delegate. When Daniels reported that the man was “campaigning” or “running” for bishop, a church higher-up chastised him. “He told me that clergymen were set apart by God and then elected and that people don’t ‘run’ for bishop in the church. I told him, ‘The hell they don’t!’” Daniels said. “They go on the circuit preaching and talking and meeting with people, and they go to General Conference and make speeches—some even send out literature talking about their qualifications! Tell me that’s not campaigning!” (United States United Methodist bishops are elected for life and assigned every four years by their respective regional [called “jurisdictional”] conferences.)

Despite perceived manipulations, members of the church press—and sometimes their secular counterparts—have distinguished themselves in their work of viewing, interpreting, and sometimes looking through the wrong end of the telescope (for the benefit of rank-and-file Methodists) at General Conference.

That inside-outsider role is one that has been taken seriously by church-press men and women throughout the church’s history. The individuals interviewed for this article are dyed-in-the-wool United Methodists, with rock-solid backgrounds as active members in their local congregations and in other denominational circles. They are also award-winning journalists with training and credentials. Daniels was reared in a home where Methodist literature and language were as much a part of everyday life as Look magazine and milk. He started his writing career in the early 1950s as a reporter for the former Associated Negro Press based in Chicago and later the Chicago Defender. He came to work in church-related journalism in the mid-1950s at Together magazine, also based in Chicago.

Another torchbearer in United Methodist journalism is Arthur West, who retired in 1975 as executive of the former Commission on Methodist Information (now United Methodist Communications). West, who lives in a church-related retirement community in Ohio, recalls with enthusiasm his first General Conference. It was 1928 and he was a freshmen at church-related Missouri Wesleyan College: “We had a very good Bible professor, and he took a bunch of us students to the [Methodist Episcopal] General Conference in Kansas City, Missouri. It was a special laity weekend, and people were invited.
I was impressed. The great pulpiteer, Charles Albert Tindley, was the keynote speaker. 

West, whose career included a stint as religion editor at the Providence (RI) Journal and Bulletin, says his turns as General Conference press officer were proud moments, in large part because of the caliber of leaders who have defined the denomination’s and the assembly’s willingness to bring the gospel to bear on political, moral, and social concerns long before the Religious Right made it okay to talk about sex and politics in polite company. “Right or wrong, we’ve never been afraid to speak up on the issues of the day. We got a reputation early on as a church speaking to the politics and moral discussions of the hour. That makes news,” said West. (Robert Lear, a colleague of West’s, agreed. “General Conference generally meets with one eye on the Discipline and one eye on the world,” he declared.)

In 1939 the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church united. The family reunion did not come without painful and dire compromise to appease racist southerners. The denomination, in reconnecting, agreed to discontinue its practice of electing and assigning bishops as a function of the churchwide assembly, General Conference. Instead, election of bishops became a regional responsibility, with the United States divided into five geographic jurisdictions—Northeast, Southeast, North Central, South Central, and Western—and a racially segregated Central Jurisdiction for blacks. “Southerners wanted those jurisdictional elections so that they wouldn’t get a black bishop. Or a white Northerner, for that matter,” West explained.

But the formal institution of racially segregated structures in the larger church did not come without struggle and was a source of ongoing contention—and headlines—for subsequent Conferences. Black Methodists, and white supporters, continued to protest a self-described Christian body that, by its structure, seemed to refute the assertion that all people are created in God’s image.

Complete racial unity and ecclesiastical unity were themes that ran through, and continue to run through, General Conference to this day. West recalled the 1968 General Conference in Dallas, where the former Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) and Methodist churches united to become The United Methodist Church. During a celebratory procession, West, information executive for the Methodists, walked, festooned in academic robes, side-by-side with Norman Klump,
mission board executive for the Evangelical United Brethren Church. "It was quite an occasion," West said. Ironically, Klump is now West's neighbor, a fellow resident at Otterbein Home in Lebanon, Ohio.

Soon after the 1968 union, West moved from his New York headquarters to Dayton. The move was partly practical and partly symbolic. A condition of the union agreement was to distribute new United Methodist headquarters among property owned by the small Evangelicals as well as those owned by the Methodists. The Evangelicals' Dayton office was chosen as the new denomination's communications headquarters. West inherited the office vacated by the late Bishop Paul M. Herrick. West said the move was also motivated by a desire to place church offices more central to the local rank-and-file members.

Lear and Lovelace: Four Decades of General Conferences

Of all the longtime members of the church press, Robert Lear is the most conversant on General Conference and has the most colorful stories. A close second is John Lovelace, who retired in 1997 as editor of the United Methodist Reporter in Dallas. Lear, who retired in 1992 as senior news director for the Washington Office of United Methodist News Service, has attended every General Conference since 1956, when he started working as communications director for the Iowa Methodist offices. He is slated to help out again in running the pressroom for the 2000 General Conference in Cleveland. Lear, also born and raised a staunch Methodist, says that nearly every General Conference had standout features, whether prophetic, catastrophic, or merely amusing.

Lovelace agrees. Born and reared in a Methodist home in Fort Worth, Texas, Lovelace earned a master's degree in religious journalism from Syracuse and was on the staff of All-Church Press in Fort Worth before going to work for The United Methodist Publishing House in 1968. He was founding editor of Newscope, the popular weekly newsletter for United Methodist leadership. Lear and Lovelace listed the following as their most vivid memories from nearly a half-century of Conference sessions.

1956 (Minneapolis): Here the institution of full clergy rights for women and the launching of the now-defunct church public-relations magazine Together stood out. "It was supposed to be the church's
'bold, new venture,' but it started out as a cross between Good Housekeeping and Arizona Highway. Later on it got to have a little more substance," Lear said. Editor Leland Case led the charge, and The Methodist Publishing House began marketing Together to laity; the Christian Advocate was retooled for clergy (Together folded in 1973). It was also at this Conference (and at the 1960 General Conference in Denver) that church watchers saw the emergence of the powerful adversaries on the issue of racial justice. Both were attorneys, both powerful orators, and both made a name for themselves in the annals of United Methodism over this issue—throwing down the gauntlet for the next 14 years. Strongly opposing racially segregated structures in the church was lay delegate Charles Parlin. Parlin attended church in Englewood, New Jersey, and was the head of Wall Street’s largest law firm and later president of both the National and World Council of Churches. On the other side was John Satterfield of Yazoo City, Mississippi, who at one time was president of the American Bar Association. Lear recalled that the two men thrilled and enraged delegates with their impassioned speeches on the issue of race. At the 1970 General Conference at St. Louis, Lear said, Satterfield carefully kept a count of the number of delegates, and within hours of the time set to adjourn he successfully moved to end the Conference early for lack of a quorum. "There was stuff on the agenda that he didn’t want to see voted on and passed," Lear said. "Of course, Parlin was on hand to oppose the move." (Interestingly, the two barristers died within months of one another, Parlin by natural causes and Satterfield by suicide.)

1964 (Pittsburgh): Lear characterized the 1964 session as one of the more interesting, largely because of hitches in the facility, stage settings, and staffing. Decorating the presider’s platform was a giant papier-mâché rendering of the hand of God holding the world. The Civil Rights movement was at its peak, and vocal agitators protested the fact that the hand was white. The issue was debated on the floor; and finally the hand was painted blue, Lear recalled. Blue hand taken care of, Conference planners then had the problem of "green" stenographers. Instead of the more experienced—and presumably most expensive—crew of stenographers, the sponsoring committee had hired new clerical staff who didn’t know much about the particulars of "Methodist-speak." (This was before computers and taped proceedings, when every word was taken by hand and transcribed.) After two days, "things got so fouled up that they had to
bring in the veterans,” said Lear. Among the unforgivable typing mistakes was the misspelling of “Junaluska.” In another near snafu, planners tried opening the domed ceiling of their meeting hall in Pittsburgh’s Civic Arena for an al fresco worship concert; but a chilly wind blew papers and shook a giant metal cross over the bishop’s area so fiercely that it sent the good shepherds scrambling for cover. The open-air directive was soon rescinded; however, the closing mechanism jammed, and it was nearly midnight before it was closed and order was restored, Lear said.

1968 (Dallas): After an interim Conference in Chicago in 1966 to further negotiations and work out of the final plan, Dallas was the scene of the General Conference that united the former Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist churches as The United Methodist Church. In the last act as an independent body, the EUBs elected Paul Washburn as their last bishop, an election recognized in the new denomination. Washburn, who died in the summer of 1999, had chaired the uniting committee for the EUB. Lear recalled “one of the most spirited sermons I’ve heard before or since” by Wesley scholar Dr. Albert C. Outler, titled “It’s Our Birthday!” “The applause was thunderous!” Lovelace noted. As a provision of the new church, the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction was officially eliminated (although some southern conferences held on to divided structures into the early 1970s). Lear also recalled that the 1968 Conference marked the end of overly long episcopal addresses after Bishop Lloyd Wicke went on for about two hours. (“I was on the copy desk in the pressroom when he started,” said Lear. “My relief person came, I walked to downtown Dallas, had a leisurely steak dinner, walked back; and Wicke was still at it.”)

1970 (St. Louis): After union, church leaders scheduled a special five-day interim session of General Conference. Major business items included organization of new denomination-wide agencies, doctrinal standards, formulation of the church’s Social Principles, and a just-announced plan for uniting nine major Christian bodies through the Consultation on Church Union. The “generation gap” was an obsession of the larger society and the church as well. Lovelace remembered a scrappy debate between the late Dr. Jameson Jones, dean of Duke Divinity School, and his teenage son, Scott, who was a youth representative and is now an ordained minister and noted Wesley scholar. “I don’t remember the issue, but it was great because
young Scott held his own. It was really of our time—two generations going at it in a very classy way,” said Lovelace.

Another sign of the times was the unfurling of a 40-foot banner in the Kiel Auditorium balcony bearing one word: “bullshit.” Lovelace couldn’t remember what the act was in reference to, but he did recount the restrained dignity of the presiding bishop, who, when he finally caught sight of the expletive, simply said quietly, “Will someone please remove that offensive sign?” “Compared to other acts of protest of the time, it was pretty mild,” said Lovelace.

Racial turmoil of the times also was reflected in the governing assembly’s proceedings. As Lear would recall nearly 30 years later in an article in Interpreter magazine:

At one point during the deliberation, scores of “silent witnesses” led by members of Black Methodists for Church Renewal [the denomination’s still-active black caucus]—and their supporters—encircled the main arena of Kiel Auditorium, quietly calling attention to the concerns and needs of the racial ethnic minorities in the church and world.3

Lear also recalled the inspired speeches by Civil Rights leader the Rev. James Lawson, a contemporary and close friend of the late Martin Luther King, Jr. “There had been all sorts of rumors about the protesters’ plans to take over and shut down the proceedings—the nation was seeing a lot of that at that time. But the protesters just stood silently, and Jim Lawson spoke eloquently as he called the church to be a voice of justice and hope for all.”

1972 (Atlanta): Study commissions brought proposals on church structure, theology, and social concerns. “These were masterful, inspired reports; and we are still pretty much influenced by what those study commissions did,” said Lovelace, recounting the leadership of Dr. (later bishop) James Thomas (social concerns), Evanston, Illinois, pastor Dow Kirkpatrick (structure), and the legendary Albert Outler (theology). Lear and Lovelace also remembered the high-caliber speakers for that session, including then-governor Jimmy Carter and both the father and wife of the late Martin Luther King, Jr. There was also a press flap when First United Methodist Church in Atlanta balked at having Conference-picked preacher, the rowdy Cecil Williams, a black maverick pastor from San Francisco, preach a Conference service in that church. “The press got hold of it, and the
church finally decided to let Cecil preach under very tight restrictions," Lear said. However, the massive publicity brought in more worshipers than expected, and the worship service had to be moved to the meeting auditorium under orders of the Atlanta fire marshall. Further racial turmoil continued as black United Methodists continued to lobby for full parity in church leadership and mission. Lovelace was awed by the "spectacular presence" of pastor Woodie White, who had just come aboard as first general secretary of the new General Commission on Religion and Race. (Today White is bishop of the Indianapolis Area.) "It was through that commission that the healing—and the prodding—of our church took place." It was also at the 1972 session that language on homosexuality first entered the Social Principles. As the issue of sexuality was discussed on the floor, a delegate moved a resolution that declared homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching"; that language was later adopted and is still part of the church’s Social Principles. For his part, Lovelace “didn’t like that language and never have. It’s one of those phrases that doesn’t say anything clearly. What does that mean? Incompatible with whose Christian teaching?”

1976 (Portland): The Portland gathering was notable because of the antics of the late Woodrow Seals, a colorful layman and judge from the Texas Annual Conference. “The conference hall was long, and the back rows were very far from the podium—so far that presiding officers often didn’t see delegates waiting to be acknowledged. Seals finally got a red towel and tied it to a broomstick, and whenever he wanted to get the chairman’s attention he stood on a chair and waved that flag,” Lear recalled.

1980 (Indianapolis): As Arthur West, retired executive of Methodist Information, said earlier, the denomination is known as one that speaks—and acts—on the pressing issue of contemporary society. General Conference in recent years, especially, has often interrupted proceedings to get where the action is. At the 1980 assembly, Methodist delegate the Rev. Bennie Warner was in exile in the wake of war in his native African nation. It was also the time of the Iran hostage crisis, Lear recalled, and General Conference sent a delegation to meet with President Jimmy Carter. Related to church program, the Conference approved a plan to buy a television station and do “values” programming. The “TV Presence in Ministry” plan failed and racked up a huge financial loss for the denomination.

1984 (Baltimore): This celebration of the bicentennial of American
Methodism at the scene of the denomination's first Conference was one of the most charming, said Lovelace. Much of the worship and publicity centered around the celebration. "I remember the guys who rode to General Conference on horseback, like those first circuit-riding preachers. It was corny, maybe, but it was also moving."

For the first time a woman bishop—the late Marjorie Swank Matthews of Wisconsin—preached the opening sermon and later presided over legislative sessions. Also for the first time in Conference history, proceedings were translated into Spanish, German, French, Korean, and Chinese; and a clause was added to the Book of Discipline that specified that "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" were barred from the ministry.

1988 (St. Louis): The much-ballyhooed United Methodist Hymnal was adopted overwhelmingly after four years of controversy over such issues as whether or not God could be rendered in feminine terms. (There was a lot of biblically based justification, but in the end the Hymnal Revision Committee stopped short of including hymns to "Mother God.") A further controversy had to do with whether "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was an appropriate celebration of the Prince of Peace. (Eleven thousand letters and calls to the revision office caused the committee to rescind its earlier vote to delete the beloved hymn. By the time the entire Hymnal got to General Conference, "Onward" was restored.) For the first time, too, a United Methodist hymnbook reflected more fully the diversity of the denomination, from the heritage of the former Evangelical United Brethren to the sacred-music traditions of African-, Asian-, Native- and Latin-American and international Christians.

1992 (Louisville): This Conference was noteworthy because the delegates took an unprecedented break in deliberations to pray and discuss in small groups the Los Angeles riots touched off by the acquittal of four white police officers accused of beating a black man. The delegates responded by creating a program of "shalom zones"—model blocks to be developed in major cities in the United States. Also, the tortuous debate over homosexuality and the church came to a climax when a four-year study committee delivered its findings to the General Conference. Delegates defeated a move to remove the prohibition against gay clergy and to make the assertion that Christians were not "of common mind" about the rightness or wrongness of homosexual practice. However, the findings of the study committee were commended to local congregations for study. The
1992 assembly also celebrated the opening of Africa University, the denomination's first four-year, private university in Zimbabwe.

1996 (Denver): Love her or hate her, but First Lady Hillary Clinton’s speech to fellow United Methodists was a major event in 1996. In the true spirit of her upbringing, Clinton challenged the church to continue its work on behalf of children, education, and the poor. Lovelace said, “I got a letter from a guy about my headline for that story in the Reporter. I had headed it, 'Hillary Thrills Delegates.' This guy thought the headline demonstrated some pro-Clinton bias on my part. I wrote him back and said, 'Brother, I don’t know if you were there, but I was and that headline positively summed up the feeling in that hall that day.' I didn’t hear from him again.”

A Concluding Retrospect

Along with the actions and the antics, the elder statesmen of the church press recalled the people who emerged as colorful, creative, prophetic, or just plain the burrs-in-the-saddle of their day. General Conference, they agreed, brought the best and worst of United Methodist thinkers to the front of church and public consciousness. Among those remembered are legal professionals, such as Parlin and Satterfield; judges, such as Jerry Bray from Virginia, Seals from Texas, and Leonard Shutz from Cincinnati; and lay delegates, such as Barbara Thompson from Baltimore-Washington. (“Barbara was an example of a passionate, dedicated laywoman who loved her church and fought for its soul,” Lovelace said, giving special accolades to the lay delegates.) Among the clergy remembered is the Rev. John Miles of Little Rock, Arkansas, who brought needed levity to the proceedings by calling for an end to tedious debate. “I move the previous question. . . . We got a lotta hogs to slop,” he was fond of saying from the Conference floor.

Daniels remembered the powerful words of retired Bishop Roy Nichols in favor of a higher moral standard for pastors than for laity as a necessary requirement for those set apart by God as ordained ministers. “He was right on it—drinking, adultery, all that. He called it out and said pastors had to have a double standard. I think a lot of people didn’t want to hear that, but Bishop Nichols believed it and he said it.”

Despite the speeches, actions, and anecdotes, Lovelace lamented
the fact that the denomination has not made as many headlines or wielded as much influence in the secular press as we may have desired or deserved. "We’re not the cultural giants we were a hundred years ago. We don’t make news much, because we’re not the Vatican; we’re not a dogmatic church. General Conference takes actions and creates our Discipline, but churches are free to comply or not comply on a lot of things. There are as many ‘mays’ as there are ‘shallss’ in that book of law, and very few ‘musts.’ " Still, says Lear, what the Methodists do matters, because “a Methodist church can be found in almost every town and rural area in the country.” And what General Conference is and does will likely be newsworthy into the millennium.

Notes

2. Tindley (1851-1933) was a Methodist clergyman and composer whose well-known works include “Nothing Between,” “[When the Storms of Life Are Raging] Stand by Me,” and “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.” Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, a premier black congregation, is named for him.
Russell E. Richey

General Conference: A Retrospective

Francis Asbury and Jesse Lee, two of the primary shapers and interpreters of American Methodism, termed the 1784 Christmas Conference a "general conference." They were wrong, technically and properly speaking, as John Tigert long ago showed. The Christmas Conference had neither the status of a "general conference" nor that of an annual conference. Instead, it was an irregularly called constitutional assembly. Neither anticipated in the procedures that governed the American movement nor authorized by John Wesley, it made no provision for its own continuance or succession. It gave itself no place in Methodist polity. Though irregular—a gambit on Asbury's part to alter the authority and governance relations between himself, Coke, and Wesley—it nevertheless set the pattern for regular general conferences, 1792 and thereafter; for the succession of annual conferences between 1784 and 1792 which carried on the "general" work; and for one specially called by Wesley in 1787 to elect Richard Whatcoat as bishop. It also set the pattern for similar bodies in the family of Wesleyan or Methodist denominations.

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"We were in great haste," said Asbury, "and did much business in a little time." In their hurry, the preachers at the Christmas Conference cared for some aspects of what a General Conference would be and do and rather neglected others. It spent most of its sessions amending Wesley's "Large Minutes" into the first Discipline, a task nicely captured in the title: Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Thomas Coke, L.L.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and others, at a Conference, Begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784. Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. This, its central, church-establishing task, the Christmas Conference performed but neglected to define in legislation. For this basic work, it made no provision in the Discipline. And in the absence of any conveyance of or limits to the amendment process and of any theory of governance or any warrant—in Scripture, tradition, experience, or reason—for such periodic "constitutional" overhaul, the collectivity of Methodist annual conferences after 1784, of General Conferences from 1792, and of similar bodies in the larger Methodist/Wesleyan/Evangelical United Brethren family have presumed that their work was to alter the Discipline. Taking this amendment prerogative for granted, Methodists have seldom stopped to reflect how very strange, how very presumptuous, how irregular it is for church bodies that convene only periodically, sit for a short period, and typically find new faces in their midst to set about reconsidering the entirety of the movement's constitutive document.

A second task undertaken by the Christmas Conference, no less constitutive and precedent-setting, was the selection of the church's episcopal leadership. Asbury had insisted that the process be elective. So it became and so the Discipline mandated. The ordination, later consecration, of the bishop also became a Conference event. Bishop Thomas Coke published his sermon on that occasion as The Substance of a Sermon Preached at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, . . . at the Ordination of the Reverend Francis Asbury, to the Office of a Superintendent. Coke apparently did much of the preaching at this particular Conference. And Conferences thereafter featured the best of Methodist preaching, a third trait reinforced, if not created by, the
Christmas Conference. Preaching would be “appointed” both for and in the Conference proper but also for and throughout the larger community, in all pulpits opened to the Conference and whenever the break of business made preaching possible. Conferences would be preaching festivals and, at least in the case of the General Conference of 1800, produced wide-scale revival. And Henry Boehm, son of one of the founders of the United Brethren and a traveling associate of Asbury, reported extensively on the preaching at the General Conferences of 1808 and 1812, explaining, “I need not give an account of the doings of the General Conference, which the reader can find in the printed journals.”

Pronouncement, Program, Precept, and Polity

Fourth, the Christmas Conference took some strong ethical stands. Of particular note, it prohibited “Ministers or Travelling-Preachers” from drinking “spirituous Liquors.” And it passed even more courageous and extensive legislation against slavery, mandating that all Methodists, laity as well as preachers, emancipate their slaves; setting timetables and ministerially administrated procedures for that process; and prescribing excommunication for refusal. From this strong pronouncement, the church would back away quickly and steadily. However, the action set an important socio-economic-political precedent.

Fifth, the Christmas Conference sanctioned the program for the new church. Specifically, it accepted the proposal from Coke and Asbury for an academy and apparently acquiesced in the naming of it for the two superintendents—Cokesbury College. It also launched the missionary enterprise, sending Freeborn Garrettson and James O. Cronwall to Nova Scotia.

Sixth and no less vital than the 1784 gathering’s crafting of the Discipline and electing bishops was its defining of the faith. It did that explicitly by adopting Wesley’s recension of the Anglican “Articles of Religion” and implicitly by understanding itself as bound to Wesleyan doctrine—Mr. Wesley’s “Sons in the Gospel.” Accordingly, it published with the Discipline as one volume Mr. Wesley’s circular letter “To Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and our brethren in North America,” the “Sunday Service,” the Articles, and Wesley’s “A Collection of Psalms and Hymns.”
Seventh, the Christmas Conference engaged itself, throughout its work, in the care of and regulation of ministry. Like Wesley’s conferences and the American ones that preceded and long followed it, the 1784 event gathered only preachers. Using Wesley’s record of conversations with his preachers, the “Large Minutes,” as its template, the American preachers inserted pieces of Anglican ministerial order and practice. They established American Methodism as episcopal, so naming it; accepted Wesley’s modification of the *Book of Common Prayer* (“The Sunday Service”); and forced Methodist patterns of Conference membership into awkward relation to Anglican orders and sacramental praxis. These preachers hadn’t time, trained personnel, or constitutional wisdom for thinking fundamentally and philosophically about how to transform an autocratically run movement into a church governed properly according to scripturally based and culturally accepted norms; how a new church in a new nation should be ordered; and where the voice of the laity would be heard or their consent garnered. And it wasn’t that the British hadn’t been thinking for two centuries about the proper ordering of the church or that the American Methodists lacked for available models. They made provision for no British-like parliamentary role, no Scottish-like or New England-like ruling elders, no Virginia-like governing lay vestries. Their oversight can certainly be understood, because most of those gathered had themselves been laity only the day before (save for Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey); or because they thought of themselves as one with the people; or because the Methodist impulse had drawn and would continue to draw its leadership immediately out of the folk. For a variety of reasons, then, the Christmas Conference established the precedence for the church’s practice of shaping polity and policy guided by little in the way of biblical, theological, or other warrant.

Finally, the positive side of the Christmas Conference’s omission of the laity from the church’s government was its preservation of the fraternal character of Conference. Conferences, both annual and general, would be for the next century great, colorful gatherings of the brotherhood of preachers. Conferences resisted inclusion—of nonwhites, of local preachers, of women, of laity. Such intransigence would shake, indeed split, the entire denomination and do so repeatedly. The resistance would be energized, if not excused, by the deep feelings, even affection, that the preachers had for one another.
and the range of emotions that their gatherings elicited. Conferences were fraternity.  

To 1792 and 1808

These several tasks—revising the Discipline, electing bishops, exhibiting preaching, making pronouncements, guiding program, defining the faith, ordering the ministry, gathering in the brotherhood—proved more difficult in the years immediately after 1784. Then the annual conference served as the Methodist Episcopal Church’s (MEC) highest assembly but met in multiple sessions—three in 1785, seven in 1788, eleven in 1789. Through the succession of conferences any important decisions had to be carried in hopes of consensus. The chaos prompted Asbury’s venture with a council, workable but unpopular because it was composed of his appointees, the presiding elders. Pressure from Jesse Lee and James O’Kelly, effectively applied on Coke, led to the calling and convening of the first General Conference in Baltimore in 1792. Like the Christmas Conference, 1792 was open rather than delegated or representative, though limited to those in full connection. Also like the Christmas Conference, 1792 undertook its basic task, revising the Discipline, with less constitutional self-awareness than one might have wanted. It neither took minutes, nor made a journal of its work. Like 1784, it left its record in the Discipline itself as Lee reported:  

At that general conference we revised the form of discipline, and made several alterations. The proceedings of that conference were not published in separate minutes, but the alterations were entered at their proper places, and published in the next edition of the form of discipline. . . .

The reflex that went into such wholesale constitutional tinkering was well captured by a motion of 1804: “Brother G. Roberts moved, that this conference revise the Discipline of our Church, and that in revising it, it shall be read chapter by chapter, section by section, and paragraph by paragraph. Carried.” The General Conference of 1792, then, established the institution. The Conference claimed for itself the legislative power for the church, established itself as a permanent body, and agreed to convene again in
four years in a conference "to which, all the preachers in full connection were at liberty to come." That plenary definition of itself, its claim to a future, and its assumption of the authority to legislate for the church—specifically to revise the Discipline (two-thirds majority being required for new actions or total rescission of existing legislation but only a majority to amend)—provided what Asbury had sought through the council; namely, a politically competent and sovereign center to the movement. General Conferences of the United Brethren followed in 1815 and of the Evangelical Association in 1816, taking on themselves the range of tasks enumerated above. (The Evangelical Association adopted a quadrennial pattern only in 1839.)

**Limiting the Membership**

The composition or membership of such bodies became problematic very quickly because of whom General Conferences excluded (no African Americans, no other local preachers, no women, no laity) and because of whom they included (all the traveling elders in full connection). The latter surfaced first as an issue as a product of the church's growth. As the denomination expanded numerically and geographically, too many preachers were eligible to come, but too many came from areas proximate to the site of the General Conference. That complaint acquired political force after the 1796 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church defined annual conferences geographically and preachers came to understand themselves as members of a specific conference. An 1800 restriction, of General Conference membership to those in full connection who had traveled four years helped with the problem of numbers but not of distribution. In 1804 it looked like this:

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>New York</td>
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<td>New England</td>
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<td>Western</td>
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General Conference: A Retrospective
Jesse Lee, who had initiated the idea of a delegated or representative General Conference in the 1780s, opposed it in 1804, 1806, and 1808. But its time had come; and, when reported out of committee in 1808 and from the pen of Joshua Soule, it was framed with a set of provisos known as the Restrictive Rules. The Rules effectively guarded essential elements of Wesleyan practice and belief from casual General Conference emendation while reasserting General Conference’s plenary authority: “The General Conference shall have full powers to make rules and regulations for our Church, under the following restrictions.” The rules that established representation—one for each five members of an annual conference—and that protected “itinerant general superintendency” also changed the relation of bishops to General Conference, giving them presidential but not membership roles.

Enlarging the Membership

Delegation solved one horn of the membership dilemma—that of limiting the number of those constitutionally included and establishing proportionality. It did not resolve other issues of representation and membership, for example, the issues of

- the free African Americans whose leadership was locked on the local level;
- the local preachers more generally into whose ranks, as the 1816 Committee of Ways and Means reported, had fallen many of the church’s “experienced, trained and pious ‘ornaments,’ ” including persons who had served in General Conference;14
- the laity who had great concern over the church’s handling of slavery, finances, salaries, publications, and the like.

One resolution of such membership pressures was by schism. Several separations occurred, each creating a new denomination with its own General Conference. African Americans found General Conference membership in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) (1816) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) (1820). The latter two issues and the related representational issue of selection procedures for presiding elders (district superintendents) produced a powerful reform movement in the 1820s.
Finding their concerns resisted or suppressed, the reformers founded the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC) in 1830, which dealt with the latter two issues by composing its delegated General Conference of equal numbers of ministers and laymen. It dealt with the first issue by qualifying membership with the word white.15

The African Americans who remained within the MEC would have their membership recognized only gradually, despite the 1844 division over slavery. In 1856, the MEC authorized missionary bishops; and Liberia elected Francis Burns, the MEC's first black bishop, in 1858. He apparently did not attend the 1860 General Conference and died prior to the Conference of 1864. The General Conference of that year authorized the bishops to organize missionary conferences among African Americans within the United States "where in their godly judgment the exigencies of the work may demand it."16 The same Conference denied representation in General Conference to these missionary conferences—an action rescinded, however, in 1868. That year the first two of the then eight black conferences, Delaware and Washington, sent clergy delegates to General Conference. The General Conference of the MEC would wait a long time before giving itself and these conferences black leadership, electing its first black bishops (not in missionary capacity), Robert E. Jones and Matthew W. Clair, in 1920.17 It should be noted that the 1864 Conference that established black annual conferences also created German annual conferences, the first of what would be a plethora of language conferences. Racial-ethnic-linguistic conferences would function thereafter both to separate and to empower.

The 1868 General Conference of the MEC also established a commission to explore union with the AMEZ and other bodies open to such overtures, legislation ironically that eventuated in meaningful discourse not between black and white ("separated brethren") but between the two white episcopal churches. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) dealt with the potential of black membership in its ranks and conferences by setting off its African American adherents into the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (1870).

The General Conferences of the MECS authorized lay delegation in 1866, the MEC in 1868. Were women "layists" and, therefore, to be qualified as delegates? The MEC opened that question by allowing women to vote in the referendum necessitated by such a change in the Restrictive Rules. In 1888 several MEC conferences tested the male definition of laity by electing five women delegates to that year's
General Conference. The women were not seated, and the issue boiled in the church press and assemblies for the next decade. Similar controversy stirred in other Methodist bodies. The General Conference of the MPC received women delegates in 1892 and seated them only after two days of debate and against the recommendation of its Credentials Committee. The United Brethren accepted lay delegates for the first time the next year, two women among them. Both bodies had earlier authorized the ordination of women, the MPC by 1892 and the United Brethren (UB) in 1889. The UB seated its first female in 1900, authorizing election of women to General Conference, and seated 24 as delegates and recognized 30 as reserves in 1904. Women were seated in the MECS in 1922. The churches in the Evangelical tradition—the Evangelical Church and the Evangelical Association—admitted laity in 1898 and 1907 but excluded women, even after their merger in 1922. They admitted women only on the eve of union with the United Brethren in 1946.18

Connectional Oversight

The first delegated General Conference, that of 1812, also experienced the novelty of William McKendree’s episcopal address, a surprise for the elderly Asbury but not for others with whom the junior bishop had taken counsel. This Conference also saw more consistent use of committees. The two initiatives would thereafter structure General Conference affairs. The 1816 Conference referred the addresses of the recently deceased Asbury and his surviving colleague, McKendree, to a committee “whose duty it shall be to report to the conference the different subjects in them proper to be committed to district committees.” That body reported out recommendations establishing six committees: episcopacy, book concern, ways and means, review and revision, safety, and temporal economy. It further proposed that two of these committees—episcopacy, and review and revision—be “of nine members, one from each annual conference.”19 That precedent would be followed for important committees thereafter, a policy that made sense in a church of nine conferences. The shaping of committee agenda through the wide-scale submission of petitions developed slowly until the slavery debates of the 1840s and then ballooned into the active overturing by the entire church to General Conference that continues to the present.
Oversight through committees by a body meeting quadrennially and then only briefly made sense because the program of the church remained largely what it had been from the beginning and manageable through the Conference apparatus derived from Wesley. And the members of General Conference were also the program, all of Methodism being simply one great missionary system and all the preachers missionaries. The preachers who voted initiatives in General Conference simply saw to their implementation on their circuit, district, or conference. Actually, then, General Conference exercised a quadrennial review but delegated its management and oversight. It continued such patterns even as the church launched the Methodist Quarterly Review for clergy and Christian Advocate for the people; formed a Missionary Society to guide far-flung outreach; established colleges; and plunged into mass education through Sunday schools.

General Conferences would elect the specialists who operated such programs, in elections quite as competitive and high-stake as those for the episcopacy. Then General Conference made these specialists—book agents, Advocate editors, (executive) secretaries—accountable to specific annual conferences; and the latter, in turn, would further delegate day-to-day oversight to the preachers of the city from which that program operated. In addition, several of these program ventures, beginning with the Missionary Society, functioned as voluntary societies, attracted their own members, encouraged auxiliaries at every level of the church, developed patterns of accountability to their dues-paying constituents, and held annual meetings in conjunction with annual conferences.

As the church’s agencies and institutions grew, this system of limited and delegated accountability and of designated giving proved more and more problematic. So in 1872 in the MEC and in 1874 in the MECS the agencies then functioning as voluntary societies were legally reconstituted as corporations under the church’s control, with boards as well as executive secretaries to be elected by General Conference. This pattern continued until 1939, at which point the General Conference of reunited Methodism surrendered its power to elect the general secretaries to the agencies themselves and much of its power to approve their boards to the jurisdictions.

Over the years, General Conferences experimented with various mechanisms for coordinating the work of the several agencies, a challenge made more acute by General Conference’s loss of direct control and by the reshuffling and combinations resultant from
merger(s). Prior to the 1968 merger, two agencies in The Methodist Church provided oversight, achieved accountability, and reported directly to General Conference. These were the Coordinating Council and the Council on World Service and Finance. After the 1968 merger, and guided partially by EUB experience, the new church established two oversight agencies: the General Council on Ministries and the General Council on Finance and Administration.

Special General Conference commissions have a long history in the church. They have seemingly grown in importance since 1939 as ad interim bodies more directly responsive to General Conference than to the agencies.

General Conference Accountability

General Conferences have “full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional”; but how does the connection check the exercise of such power? And who or what can assess or determine the constitutionality of the actions of General Conference? That issue came to the fore in the General Conference of 1844 and in the division of episcopal Methodism. The Conference raised a number of fundamental issues: what would the church do about slavery and, particularly, a slave-holding bishop? What force and continued applicability remained in its ethical commitments? What was really meant by itinerant general superintendency and what compromised it? What power did General Conference have over the bishops? Could the Conference remove a bishop from office, other than through prescribed judicial action; or was the episcopacy (as southerners argued) a coordinate branch of the church, not an office of or under the control of General Conference? Was General Conference to judge the constitutionality of its own acts?

On this last question, the MECS thought not and made provision in 1854 for the bishops to challenge the constitutionality of a General Conference action. A challenged action then required a two-thirds majority. The MEC, consistent with its understanding of the supremacy of General Conference, created its own Judicial Committee in 1876, initially limiting its jurisdiction to appeals from annual conferences. In 1884, the General Conference of the MEC extended the Judicial Committee’s authority somewhat, but far short of the ability to arrest legislation. The creation of a Judicial Council
with such plenary and arresting power became a recurrent ultimatum of the MECS in the several decades of negotiation that produced the 1939 union. Another instrumentality of accountability, not often noted, also derives from the 1844 General Conference. That Conference and its heated, sometimes eloquent debates were the first to be covered in a Daily Christian Advocate, a responsibility exercised that year by the Western Book Concern (Cincinnati); that Conference was also the first to publish its Journal. Thereafter, both delegates and the reading Methodist public had a reliable, direct, and immediate way of keeping tabs on General Conferences.

**Jurisdictioned and Re-Jurisdictioned**

The union in 1939 that brought together the MPC, MECS, and MEC wrought more changes in the fabric of General Conference life than the institution of a Judicial Council. The most significant change (another ultimatum from the MECS) was the creation of a national conference structure—the Central Jurisdiction—that would separate the black membership of the MEC (much of it in the South) from the white churches, districts, and conferences of the MECS. This action also protected the (white) minority’s interests and capacities for self-direction in the new church. The new church featured six jurisdictions: five of them regional, the sixth an all African-American entity, putting together the black membership from the MEC and MPC.

To the jurisdictions the 1939 plan assigned what had been key General Conference powers—in particular, the election of bishops; the determination of annual conference boundaries; the hearing of clergy appeals; and the approval of slates of directors of denominational boards. (The election of the general secretaries of the boards, the Uniting Conference surrendered, as already noted, to the boards themselves.) In addition, the jurisdictional conferences were empowered to care for “evangelistic, educational, missionary and benevolent interests” and requisite to such endeavors to elaborate administrative machinery.

The 1939 plan also provided for equal lay and clergy representation on the several Conference levels, the delegates to jurisdictional and General Conferences being elected by lay and clergy annual-conference members voting separately.

Criticisms of jurisdictions, and especially of constitutionalized
racism, surfaced when early versions of the plan were introduced in the 1920s; criticism also greeted the final version of the plan and followed it after implementation. The 1956 General Conference approved provisions for transfer of churches and conferences between jurisdictions, but only with the 1968 merger of the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist churches was full dismantling of the Central Jurisdiction voted. Its abolition and the union of the once-German denomination (EUB) and the Methodist Church ended over two centuries of accommodating racial, ethnic, and linguistic interests in Conference structures and thereby channeling and defining participation in General Conference and national affairs.

Almost immediately racial, ethnic, and linguistic interests re-jurisdictioned themselves in caucus form, their needs hardly satisfied in the two missionary conferences that were allowed to continue (Rio Grande and Oklahoma). The Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR) formed in 1968; the Native American International Caucus (NAIC) in 1970; the National Fellowship of Asian American United Methodists (NFAAUM) in 1971; and Methodists Associated Representing the Cause of Hispanic Americans (MARCHA) in 1971. Other caucuses formed soon thereafter, some from pre-existing movements. And some caucus-like impulses found expression in general boards. General Conference had defined away particularity in one form to find it reasserting itself in a new guise. Thereafter, caucuses would become important features of General Conference life. Furthermore, the church would launch and fund new programs, like the Ethnic Minority Local Church, to sustain ministries once cared for through Conference structures. Despite such efforts, the case for language conferences, specifically for Korean communities, would be heard again.

In the period following the 1968 Conference, delegates, board members, and bishops from Central Conferences came increasingly to play an active role in the affairs of General Conference, to register unhappiness with the marginal role previously accorded them, and to put their needs and accomplishments to the fore.

**Book-Making**

Over the years, the General Conference has altered, increased, reshaped, and delegated the duties inherited from the Christmas
Conference—revising the Discipline, electing bishops, exhibiting preaching, making pronouncements, guiding program, defining the faith, ordering the ministry, and gathering in the brotherhood. Much of its work, as always, has focused on its first task—revising the Discipline. There it would lodge its mandates and pronouncements; prescribe program; define the faith; order the ministry; prescribe how bishops would be elected, where they would be assigned, and what they would do; and define who belonged to the brotherhood and, eventually, the sisterhood. Even the preaching would be shaped by what General Conference did within the Discipline in relation to courses of study and seminaries.

Since General Conferences could not squeeze all they did and wanted to convey into the Discipline, they began to publish their Journals and the Daily Christian Advocate (DCA) (1844). In the twentieth century, the Advance Edition of the DCA, with proposed legislation and significant petitions, would become important. And after 1968, General Conferences would pull together their social witness into The Book of Resolutions.

Also after 1968, General Conferences would increasingly restructure early portions of the Discipline so as to display “upfront” and to interpret Methodism’s basic commitments and beliefs. Further, recent General Conferences have had to deal with and approve a new Hymnal and Book of Worship, tasks that thankfully come infrequently. But to making book there seems to be no end. Beginning in 1996, General Conference put its activities, speeches, reports, and actions on a web site, a rich cyber-book for all to read who would and could.

Conclusion

“We were in great haste,” said Asbury, “and did much business in a little time.” The worry implicit in Asbury’s early report, at some point, may be worth hearing. Perhaps General Conferences and Methodism would benefit from less production, less preoccupation with machinery, less book-making, and more Christian conferencing, more reflective conversation, and more effort to discern the work of God.
Notes


2. The 1787 gathering refused Wesley's bidding, and Whatcoat would be elected only in 1800.

3. (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785). For the comparison of the two—the Large Minutes and first Discipline—see Tigert, History, 532-602.

4. Published at the desire of the Conference (Baltimore, 1785; reprinted New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840).


12. For discussion of these developments, see J. Bruce Behney & Paul H. Eller, The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, ed. by Kenneth W. Krueger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

13. JGMEC/1804, 48. This tally differs slightly from the enumeration given by Lee, Short History, 297.


15. See Edward J. Drinkhouse, History of Methodism Reform 2 (Baltimore and Pittsburgh: The Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), 275-76.

16. JGMEC/1864, 485-86. On Burns, see James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and


19. JG/MEC/1816, 126, 128-29.


22. JG/MEC/1884, 74.


24. For a discussion of the effects of these several changes, see Richey, *Methodist Conference*, 175-84.

25. See the essay in this collection by Faith Richardson.
Bishops and the General Conference

Since 1792 American Methodism has had both bishops and a General Conference, and for two centuries their relation has given rise to controversy. That they are inseparably joined, however, has never been questioned. Nor has it been in doubt since that November day in 1784 when Asbury was offered Wesley’s appointment as a general superintendent and refused to accept it without the approval of the preachers that the final power in American Methodism was vested in those preachers. As a result, Conference took on meaning and significance in America which it had never had in England and which Wesley never envisioned or intended. By a single act, Asbury transformed the Methodist connection in America.

Creating a General Conference

Between the organizing conference in 1784 and 1792, Methodist business was conducted in the annual conferences, meeting separately. All the preachers attended. This quickly proved cumbersome, especially as the size of the connection increased. There were 11 conferences in 1789 scattered from Charleston to New York, and

James E. Kirby, Professor of Church History at Perkins School of Theology, served previously as Dean of Perkins and of Theological School at Drew University. He is the author of Brother Will: A Biography of William C. Martin and The Episcopacy in American Methodism.
13 by 1791. It was not possible for each annual conference to act on the business of the general church, and it was difficult to gain unanimous approval on any proposal put before them. In response, Asbury attempted to organize a "Council" composed of the bishops and presiding elders chosen by the separate conferences. Although his idea was reasonable, the organization was flawed, because it gave too much power to the bishops; and not even Asbury's influence was sufficient to overcome the opposition of the preachers. He was forced quickly to abandon the idea in the interest of harmony, and the General Conference was born in 1792. It was to meet every four years and be composed of all elders in full connection. This innovation was due largely to the efforts of Thomas Coke, James O'Kelly, and Jesse Lee. Because the bishops were elders in full connection, they, too, were eligible to attend the General Conference and enjoyed all the privileges of membership, including the right to make motions and vote. In addition, they were given the responsibility to preside over its deliberations and to station the preachers in the annual conferences.

The power of Methodist bishops then and now is founded on that appointive authority. When the first "general conference" was convened in 1792, James O'Kelly challenged Asbury and his authority to appoint the preachers. He moved to establish an avenue of appeal to the Conference for any preacher who thought himself harmed by an appointment. Although O'Kelly's motion failed, it established again the fact that the authority of bishops is delegated to them by the body of preachers who consent to serve under their direction. The historian of Methodism, John Tigert, put it this way: "The itinerancy rests upon a voluntary compact of mutual satisfaction, which may be dissolved at the will of either party, exercised according to law made and provided."

The first General Conference arrangement had eventually to be modified in order to guarantee fair representation to all members of the connection. Because it was always easier for the conferences in proximity to Baltimore to bring large numbers of representatives, Methodists in the West and the South always found themselves in the minority. The solution was to establish a delegated form of the General Conference in which all conferences were equally represented. This solution, authorized in 1808, marked a significant change in the relation of the bishops to the General Conference—although their powers remained essentially the same as they had been since 1784. Since bishops were not members of any annual
conference, they were not eligible to be elected to the General Conference. Their role was now to preside over the elected assembly and to exercise the privileges of its members only by requesting and gaining the consent of Conference. The delegated Conference that was created in 1808 was to be made up of one elder from each annual conference who had traveled a minimum of four calendar years, and the Conference was to meet on the first day of May every four years. As a body, the Conference is "an agent, not a principal. It is a dependent body, with derived powers. These powers are defined in a Constitution issuing from the body that ordained the Delegated Conference." As it had been since 1784, the locus of power remained in the body of traveling elders. Under the leadership of Joshua Soule, the new Constitution protected the Methodist form of episcopacy by requiring that the General Conference "shall not change or alter any part or rule of our government, so as to do away with episcopacy, or destroy the plan of our itinerant general superintendency" (Third Restrictive Rule).

The Episcopal Address

At the first meeting of the delegated General Conference in 1812, Bishop William McKendree (who had been elected in 1808) took an innovative step by making an episcopal address. After first consulting a group of delegates to solicit both their opinion about the propriety of giving the address and specifically their comments on what he had written, McKendree read the address to the Conference on Tuesday afternoon, May 5, 1812. Asbury was not among those consulted, so McKendree's speech came as a surprise to him. He rose and challenged his younger colleague, claiming that McKendree had done "a new thing." Speaking directly to McKendree, Asbury said, "I never did business in this way, and why is this new thing introduced?" Facing the venerable Asbury, McKendree replied, "You are our father, we are your sons; you never have had need of it. I am only a brother and have need of it." Asbury smiled, and the episcopal address became a regular feature of every General Conference. McKendree's address outlined his understanding of the state of the church, admonished unity and love throughout the connection; and described candidly his understanding of his relation as a bishop to the new Conference. He declared himself to be the holder of delegated power.
and amenable, as bishops had always been, to the Conference for his conduct and administration.  

McKendree's address received a mixed response. John Early's motion the next day to record it in the Journal was lost; however, Jesse Lee's motion to include the address in the Conference papers carried. During the afternoon, the Conference organized itself for the first time into a committee of the whole, and the address was formally received by it for consideration. In this manner, the various parts were used to establish an agenda and were later brought separately back to the Conference for action or referred by it to select committees for consideration.

Today the episcopal address opens the General Conference. It is written and delivered by a bishop elected in the Council of Bishops. The task, which is considered a great honor, is normally rotated among the jurisdictions; and in 2000 a historic "first" will be observed when a Central Conference bishop, Emerito P. Nacpil, will deliver the address. When William C. Martin was chosen to prepare the address for the 1960 General Conference, he wrote words in his diary which likely express the aspiration of all the individuals who have been given the assignment. "Methodism needs a marching song," he said. "I wish I could write it."

The author, chosen two years in advance of the General Conference, is expected to consult extensively with the members of the Council of Bishops and church leaders on subjects to be included. A draft is usually reviewed in the fall meeting of the Council in the year before it is read. The address for the Conference in 2000 was reviewed for the first time six months ahead of the normal schedule. After the various versions are discussed by the Council, revisions are made until the Council, at its meeting immediately preceding the opening of General Conference, approves the final draft. It was once customary for the address to be signed by every member of the Council, but that is no longer the case. Nevertheless, it is a statement which is understood to be the expression of the Council and to be representative of its views.

The episcopal address is always lengthy, often running to 20,000 words or more, and sometimes takes the better part of two hours to read. Copies are printed in advance for distribution, and the version delivered to the Conference is usually a somewhat shortened version of the full text. Since McKendree's time General Conference has assigned to its bishops the responsibility to express their views and to
direct the church's attention to areas that, in their opinion, are worthy of thoughtful consideration; that is, the bishops are called upon to set an agenda. Even a cursory review of the episcopal address at various Conferences reveals the bishops' assessment of the major issues confronting the church; but the reality is that the delegates bring to the Conference their own agenda, too.

Two Patterns of Episcopacy

Ever since the delegated General Conference was created, there has been a question of who has authority to judge the constitutionality of its actions. Briefly summarized, the Methodist Episcopal Church affirmed a "strong" General Conference and understood the bishops to be its officers. Methodist Episcopal bishop, T. B. Neely, says that bishops lost their authority to interpret church law when General Conference was formed, "for the General Conference was to be the interpreter as well as the maker of church law." Neely's interpretation was rejected in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), which looked to its bishops for this function. The MECS believed the episcopacy and the General Conference to have been established by the Constitution in 1808 as co-equal bodies sharing power in the church's government. They argued that the bishops existed before the delegated Conference was created and affirmed Bishop McKendree's understanding that both Conference and general superintendents "from the preachers collectively . . . derive their powers." In the mind of the southern branch of the denomination, the primary function of the episcopacy was to strengthen and protect the itinerant system. Asbury once said that no spiritual reformation was possible without a "well directed itinerancy," and that responsibility belonged to him and his successors. Building on the foundation of co-equal bodies, at its third General Conference in 1854, the MECS gave to its bishops the authority to object to any action of the General Conference which they deemed to be unconstitutional. Norman Spellman judged that act to mark "the peak of episcopal power in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—indeed, in any branch of Methodism." Although the 1854 legislation was replaced in 1870, the authority of the bishops to rule on the constitutionality of the acts of the General Conference remained intact. Should the General Conference object to the bishops'
interpretation, the ultimate arena in which their rulings would be judged was the annual conference.

The enhanced role of bishops in the MECS called forth from the clergy individuals who seemed suited to such work. Bishops in the Southern church often came from the ranks of college presidents and the editors of church papers. One of the best known of these was Warren Candler. The description by his students at Emory College of what they had learned from him tells more about the teacher than it does about their accomplishments. They wrote they had learned "that what Shorty [Candler] does not know has not been found out. Shorty did not make the earth, but was put there to run it. That Shorty is sorry for those that disagree with him, for they are wrong." Bishop Collins Denny was said to have the best legal mind in the church. Many brought to the office of bishop forceful personalities that contributed to an autocratic style of leadership. They developed a formal, if not regal, manner. Until 1939, bishops in the Southern church did not address one another by their first names in the College of Bishops.

For Southern Methodists, the action taken in the 1844 General Conference with respect to the case of slave-holding bishop James O. Andrew exemplified the inherent risks associated with a strong General Conference. Although slavery was clearly an issue before the church, so was polity. The majority affirmed the notion that the bishops were officers of the General Conference and concluded in the case of Bishop Andrew that, if the Conference had power to bestow the office, it could also take it away. This position was outlined in the speech made by Leonidas L. Hamline during the debates on Bishop Andrew’s case. Hamline, the founder and editor of the *Ladies Repository*, began by enlarging the position of Alfred Griffith, who had earlier claimed that a Methodist bishop is an officer of the General Conference and that that body has “full authority to regulate their own officers.” Speaking in support of Griffith’s motion, Hamline argued that throughout Methodist history “strict amenability in Church officers, subordinate and superior, is provided for in our Discipline.” Describing a variety of relationships—pastor to class leader, presiding elder to pastor, bishop to presiding elders—Hamline argued that in each there was the power to exercise summary removals. They were, he said, “ministerial, rather than a judicial act... for being ‘unacceptable.’ ” By analogy he affirmed that the power to “depose a bishop summarily for improprieties morally innocent, which embarrass the exercise of his functions,” is derived from “the
relations of the General Conference to the Church, and to the episcopacy.” That Conference, Hamline concluded, “is the ultimate depository of power in our church.” It is supreme in its legislative, judicial, and executive authority and “is the fountain of all official executive authority.”

Hamline then moved to make a crucial point in his argument: “Our Church constitution recognizes the episcopacy as an abstraction and leaves this body to work it into a concrete form in any hundred or more ways we may be able to invent.” He reminded the delegates that they were only being asked to do something that the bishops themselves do on a regular basis. “Does he not summarily remove, at discretion, all the four years round, two hundred presiding elders, and two thousand of his peers; and shall he complain that a General Conference, which is a delegated body . . . should do to him what he so uniformly does to them?” He concluded by urging the delegates not to lose sight of the fact that “the General Conference is the sun of our system.” From that sun, all parts of the church draw light and strength.

The author of the Constitution, Joshua Soule, asked for the privilege of the floor and took strong exception to what Hamline had said:

I wish to say, explicitly, that if the superintendents are only to be regarded as the officers of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and consequently as officers of the Methodist Episcopal Church liable to be deposed at will by a simple majority of this body without a form of trial, no obligation existing growing out of the constitution and laws of the Church, even to assign cause, wherefore I say, if this doctrine be a correct one, everything I have to say hereafter is powerless, and falls to the ground.

In their “Minority Report,” presented by H. B. Bascom of Kentucky to the 1844 General Conference, the Conference delegates from the slave-holding conferences affirmed their conviction that “a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church is not a mere creature—is in no prominent sense an officer of the General Conference . . . but is a coordinate branch of the executive department of the church.”

True to his convictions, Soule, a native of Maine, later joined the Southern branch, because he understood it to have the proper “Asburian” form of episcopacy. And Hamline, acting in accord with
his conviction, became the first Methodist bishop ever to resign the office. (He resigned in 1852 because of ill health.)

The Council of Bishops

The Plan of Union under which The Methodist Church was organized in 1939 made significant changes in the denomination. It created a separate judicial branch and, thereby, finally resolved the issue of authority to determine the constitutionality of the acts of the General Conference. It created a jurisdictional system that changed the nature of the episcopal office more than any other act in our history.

The Plan of Union also created the Council of Bishops, giving legal status to the informal groups, such as the College of Bishops in the MECS, that had existed previously. Prior to 1939 bishops were elected in the General Conference. Although bishops had years before ceased to be in any sense "itinerant, general superintendents" in the style of Asbury or McKendree, electing them in the regional conferences of Methodism was the penultimate step in making them diocesan bishops. The result was that the leadership of a global church was placed in the hands of regional executives, most of whom had never served outside their conferences.

Collectively this responsibility for leading world Methodism was lodged in the Council of Bishops. When first organized, the Council had 37 members, two from the former Methodist Protestant Church, 21 general superintendents from the Methodist Episcopal Church (plus two missionary bishops), and twelve from the South (seven of whom had been elected the year prior to reunion). In addition, retired bishops and bishops of the Central Conferences were included in the membership of the Council. Retired bishops were given the privilege of voice but not vote, while the leaders of the Central Conferences were restricted to speaking on matters that directly affected their work. They continue to be elected for limited terms rather than for life.

The Council was required by the Plan of Union to meet at least once a year "to plan for the general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual interest of the entire Church . . . ." From the beginning it has been unable to fulfill this mission. The focus of the Council's work and interest was North America. Following a distinction accepted in the Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Church recognized two types of episcopal supervision:
“General Superintendency and Limited Superintendency, the first class is protected by the Constitution from legislative interference in the prescribed functions. The other is subject to limitations imposed by legislation.”

Those limitations included election to the office of bishop for a term rather than for life. Bishops from the Central Conferences were not allowed to vote on all issues before the Council until 1956 and could not preside in the sessions of the General Conference until 1960. Black members of the Council in its early years were not expected to speak on issues that did not involve African-American conferences or congregations. The year 1960 also marked the election of the first African-American bishop as chair of a board in the church. Differences between the former Northern and Southern branches of the denomination existed for years. A longtime member of the Council described their relation as a condition of “the Lord watch between thee and me.”

The Council has always been required to operate by consensus, since “no Methodist Bishop has ever had the power to tell another bishop what to do, and no Methodist bishop is bound even by any action of the bishops meeting in council, except as he chooses so to be.”

For years bishops described the Council as “the episcopal family.” The current Book of Discipline describes it as a “faith community of mutual trust and concern.”

The rule of seniority prevailed until its committee structure was established in 1968 and, as then junior Bishop James S. Thomas learned by sad experience, it was forbidden by custom to move “the previous question” in order to cut off debate. Moreover, the members of the Council did not think of themselves as leaders of a global church. Bishop Thomas, who served in the Council as an active bishop for 24 years, said: “There is little evidence to indicate that the Council was a group of General Superintendents with large concern for and authority in the whole church.” He experienced the Council as “a warm fellowship of leaders with great influence in their individual Conferences but with little sense of a ‘General Superintendency’.”

**Upstaging General Conference or Historic Episcopate?**

As the Council of Bishops has evolved over the last 30 years, it has developed new devices for managing its internal relationships and for exercising leadership across, as well as outside, the church. The
question since 1939 has been how regional administrators can direct and oversee the operation of a global church. Moreover, there is a problem in maintaining continuity in its leadership. The president of the Council serves for one year, and the leadership and power in the Council has often been found in its secretary. For three decades the position of secretary was held by G. Bromley Oxnam and Roy Short. Bishop Prince Taylor described Short as the “silent leader of the Council.” When Oxnam resigned as secretary of the Council at age 64 he commented, “This is a very hard decision to make since this office has been and is the most influential position in the church.”

When the not-so-silent Oxnam was secretary, he controlled every aspect of the Council’s operation, even to the point of withholding the Council’s agenda from the presiding officer until it convened. The lack of continuity in presidents of the Council and the inability of the bishops, or anyone else, to speak for the church between sessions of the General Conference has hindered the effectiveness of Methodists in being fully engaged in the ecumenical discussions. For that reason the Council has recently designated a retired member, Bishop William Boyd Grove, to serve as an “Ecumenical Officer.” Although the idea has always been rejected, especially by bishops from the South Central and Southeastern Jurisdictions, there have been efforts from time to time to create an office of “Presiding Bishop” who would serve at least a four-year term. Perhaps the move to create an Ecumenical Officer is a step in that direction.

In recent years the increased size of the Council has created a new set of problems. In 1996 the Council had 50 active bishops serving assignments in the United States, eleven from Africa, one in Eurasia, three in Europe, and three in the Philippines. In addition, there were 76 retired bishops eligible to meet with it. In 1968 a committee structure was put into place. Although the new organization streamlined how business was done and blunted the traditional seniority system, it eliminated the opportunity for the Council as a whole to consider every issue brought before it. The size of the Council, plus its historic commitment to reach consensus, has made the Council less able to deal with controversy. This fact was clearly illustrated in 1996, when a group of 15 bishops issued a statement to the General Conference on Methodism and homosexuality. The statement, which was released first to the press, was not brought before the Council for consideration; and not all the members were consulted before it was released. In the minds of some bishops, it was
a "breaking of covenant," splitting the Council against the law of the church, which bishops are bound to uphold. Some members of the Council were personally offended by what they regarded as a breach of trust and were angry with their colleagues. The issue for those who signed the statement, as one told me, was "how to disagree with the Discipline without disobeying it." They had concluded that what they did was the only way to present a minority view to the church. Nothing in the recent memory of Council members has been more controversial than this statement. A number of meetings of the Council since the 1996 General Conference have been focused on process and on creating a better climate in the Council for discussion. As one member told me, however, the real issue has never been laid on the table for discussion.

In an attempt to enable members of the Council to know one another better and to facilitate process and discussion, Covenant Groups were organized in 1992. These groups of nine or ten bishops change membership every four years. The conversations in the small groups, which normally begin the day at Council meetings, are confidential and often cover topics which might, at one time, have been considered in the body as a whole. Although some bishops question whether persons who are not mutually accountable and are in every sense equals can enter into a covenant—and, if so, what kind—others regard this innovation as having had a positive effect on the Council.

From the time it was first organized, the Council has issued statements to the membership of the church. Between 1939 and 1978 the Council addressed the denomination a total of 22 times on a variety of topics. The first, sent on the eve of World War II, was titled "Message on the World Situation." More recently, statements have been given on a variety of topics, including "In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace" (1986); "Vital Congregations, Faithful Disciples" (1990); and "Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative" (1996). That the last of these has been translated into an initiative has caused some bishops to question whether the Council is in danger of becoming another program agency in the church. Tempting as that might be, it appears for now that Russell Richey is correct in regarding these pronouncements from the Council as an attempt on the part of the bishops "in a united fashion" to give "theological leadership to the Church." The role of United Methodist bishops is now defined in terms of the
more traditional tasks of the historic episcopate: "to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church; to seek and be a sign of the unity of the faith" as well as "to supervise and support the Church's life, work, and mission throughout the world..." One could well argue that such has not been the understanding of the office among Methodists. Bishop Prince Taylor said, "The Methodist episcopacy was created to meet needs, it is not part of the historic episcopacy." Certainly the first part of the statement is demonstrably true. The result is what Bishop Thomas has described as an "identity crisis" in which bishops no longer function as exemplars and controllers of the itinerant system but do not yet realize the global leadership and historic office towards which they seem to be moving.

Presiding

When the General Conference assembles in 2000, the bishops will be seated on the platform. In rotating assignments, one of them will act, as they have since 1792, as a presiding officer. Although a recently elected bishop described the bishops during the General Conference as "just like the potted palms—a part of the decorations," their role in presiding is not quite so benign. Despite the bishops' lack of membership in the General Conference, so long as bishops preside over the boards of the church, they will stand at its microphones to make reports, answer questions, offer clarifications, and always have the final word before a vote is taken. It is a position of influence.

Although a committee chooses the bishops who preside at the various sessions of General Conference, bishops are chosen with care. There is always consideration of the issues that will come before the delegates in any session and an assessment of the likelihood of controversy being associated with them. Because some bishops are known to have expertise in certain areas of the work of the church, they can be effective as presiding officers when those topics are before the Conference. There are also some old-fashioned political considerations, too. Bishop Joseph Yeakel either served as president of the General Council on Finance and Administration or he presided in the session at which its report was presented for adoption in five General Conferences. He acknowledged being invited on one occasion to meet with the legislative committee in advance of its report about a controversial issue on which he would rule as presiding officer.

BISHOPS AND THE GENERAL CONFERENCE
It has long been the custom, though now challenged, for the bishops to serve as presidents of the various boards and agencies. Bishop Arthur J. Moore, who had served overseas, presided over the Board of Missions, and Bishop Frank Smith over the Division of National Missions for years. Bishop William C. Martin was the founding president and led the Commission on Promotion and Cultivation until his retirement in 1964; Bishop Angie Smith's name was once synonymous with the Board of Evangelism. Bishop Prince Taylor chaired the significant work of the Commission on the Structure of Methodism Overseas, which, among other things, enabled the bishops of the Central Conferences to attend General Conference. In these capacities many bishops have developed high levels of expertise over the years and have thereby increased their influence. Should the bishops be removed from these positions of leadership by the election of laypersons or non-episcopal clergy, their power will, indeed, be diminished in the General Conference.

While in the chair, bishops have the power to recognize or ignore delegates wishing to speak on any subject. In the plenary setting of General Conference, delegates cannot be heard without being recognized. Presiding officers are often informed in advance of the names of persons who will speak for a committee and will expect to give them time on the floor. The level of the bishops' skill in presiding can expedite or hinder the business of the Conference, especially in its closing sessions. At the last session of the 1960 General Conference, Bishop William C. Martin guided the delegates through 92 reports before adjourning on time, but in 1976 a presiding officer became so confused by the complexities of the debate and so unable to direct the proceedings that he had to be replaced.

The 2000 General Conference promises to be a lively one. The United Methodist stands on homosexuality and other issues have already produced controversy within the denomination that will echo in the halls of the General Conference. As in 1836, when the Methodist Episcopal Church placed a gag rule on the discussion of slavery, the bishops may find themselves caught between their personal convictions and the policy made in the General Conference, which they are bound to uphold and to which they are accountable for their "conduct and administration." And that same Conference will, once again, assign them the responsibility as "general superintendents" of leading a global church on the threshold of a new
millennium in a deeply divided and troubled world. It is a formidable challenge that faces them on the eve of this General Conference.

Notes

4. Ibid., 269.
10. Alfred Griffith speaking to his motion, JGC/MEC (1844), "Debates," 2, 83.
11. Ibid., 128.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 130.
14. Ibid., 133.
15. Ibid., 134.
16. Ibid., 169.
17. JGC/MEC (1844), 2, 194.

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25. Bishop James K. Mathews compiled these under the title “Messages of the Council of Bishops of the Methodist Church, The United Methodist Church during Its First Forty Years, 1939–1978” (Typescript, n.d.)
C. Faith Richardson

Producing the Discipline

The Judicial Council has declared the Discipline to be United Methodism’s book of law, “its only official and authoritative law book.” The Discipline itself proclaims General Conference to “have full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional.” And, as the bishops say in their prefatory Episcopal Greeting, “Each General Conference amends, perfects, clarifies, and adds its own contribution to the Discipline.” General Conferences convene with a book in hand—the prior Discipline—which seemingly accords with such clarity and decisiveness. They adjourn having dealt with myriad petitions, rushed items through at the last moment, and passed great quantities of legislation on consent calendars, thus leaving no such cohesion, clarity and decisiveness; indeed, they leave no book at all.

General Conferences Observed

Since The United Methodist Church was established in 1968, I have seen the workings of all the General Conferences: Dallas, St. Louis, Atlanta, Portland, Indianapolis, Baltimore, St. Louis, Louisville, and

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Denver. I have also observed and/or participated in the processes by which the legislative chaos left at adjournment becomes a book. I have learned a great deal about producing the *Discipline*.

About six months prior to the 1968 union, I became administrative assistant to Bishop James K. Mathews. One of my early tasks was to take materials he had accumulated and draft a resolution to be presented to the forthcoming General Conference in Dallas. The 1968 General Conference did not complete its work and ordered a special session to be held two years later in St. Louis. I attended this session, sitting “on the floor” with other women from offices of bishops. Those five days in April 1970 gave me a first glimpse of how a few politically savvy individuals could wield power in the legislative branch of the church and change matters that affected all members of the denomination.

The 1972 General Conference, held in Atlanta, April 16-28, legislated for a “Restructured Church” (Bishop Roy H. Short’s term). Although the bishops have no vote at any level, they are the ones who preside over General Conferences and collectively as a Council of Bishops are responsible for “carrying into effect the rules, regulations, and responsibilities prescribed and enjoined by the General Conference . . .”). However, when the 1972 General Conference adjourned, there were only scattered items in the *Daily Christian Advocate* to indicate all the disciplinary matters dealing with the new structure that were to be put into effect almost immediately.

**Working Drafts**

The bishops knew it would be months before a new *Book of Discipline* would be printed; so before we left Atlanta, Bishop Mathews asked if I could provide him with a list of changes that would affect the three annual conferences over which he would soon preside. At home each evening for more than a week, I systematically checked legislation and cut and pasted items from the *Daily Christian Advocate* into a “Book of Discipline.” When I took the finished product into the office, Bishop Mathews telephoned Bishop Roy H. Short, Secretary of the Council of Bishops, who authorized duplication and mailing to each active bishop.

The United Methodist Publishing House had the 1972 *Book of Discipline* in print during 1973. The bishops, who had used my
version for almost a year, noted some variances with the published version. So the bishops asked the people charged by The Plan of Organization and Rules of Order of the General Conference with editing the Book of Discipline to "in the exercise of their judgment . . . make such changes in text and phraseology as may be necessary to harmonize the proposed legislation without changing its intent or substance." It was discovered that some of the delay and variances had been caused by the editors contacting general agencies, asking them to send back what they considered to be the correct legislation.

A Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision

As the bishops were preparing for the 1976 General Conference, they encouraged the Book Editor to set up a process whereby there could be a more accurate and prompt publication of the Book of Discipline. I was named to the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision, whose task at that time was merely to "report promptly . . . any and all contradictions, duplications, and inconsistencies." After Bishop L. Scott Allen's report at its November 1976 meeting, the Council of Bishops voted to "request the publisher of the 1976 Discipline to prepare a list of corrections needed . . . to harmonize its paragraphs with the Daily Christian Advocate." Four pages of Errata were published, omitting one paragraph that had been adopted (it eventually became ¶1512.6 in the 1980 Book of Discipline).

This situation led to a significant change at the 1980 General Conference. After Thomas L. Cromwell, chair of the Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order, met with the General Council on Ministries and the Council of Bishops, that committee recommended to the General Conference that the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision "continue to exist after General Conference and work with those persons charged with editing the Discipline."

Appointed to the 1980 Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision were Bishop L. Scott Allen, John K. Bergland, Ronald K. Johnson, and I (who was elected chair). Prior to arrival in Indianapolis committee members carefully reviewed the Advance Daily Christian Advocate (DCA) materials and had compiled a list of more than 20 possible conflicts and editorial problems. Over the next ten days we learned about the complicated, lengthy process of getting legislation
enacted; the lobbying done by general agencies and various groups; and the confusion and errors resulting from "omnibus motions" and "consent calendars" whereby only about one-tenth of General Conference members know about the enacted Disciplinary paragraph or resolution.

The Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision sat and listened attentively at each session of General Conference, keeping track of every action. Individual members of the committee took individual responsibility for various sections of the Discipline, compiling a paste-up 1980 "Book of Discipline." Jean Kerr Crawford of Abingdon Press produced another. General agencies were sent galley proofs to check legislation pertaining to them.

When the committee later met with the Book Editor, Ronald P. Patterson, at The United Methodist Publishing House in Nashville, in addition to checking the two paste-up versions for any variations and proofreading, it had to resolve 19 separate matters where legislative action had been ambiguous. Because we were producing a "book of law," the committee decided nothing could be assumed; only the material printed in the Daily Christian Advocate could be used. For instance, it was agreed that an amendment made by a legislative committee but inadvertently not reported for General Conference action could not be included in the Discipline.

The committee realized that a number of changes in General Conference procedure would make the process more trustworthy. Under the valuable tutelage of Bishop L. Scott Allen, the committee formulated six procedural suggestions which Ronald K. Johnson, the committee's secretary, submitted to the Council of Bishops on June 23, 1980.

Legislation as Remembered and as Published

The 1980 Book of Discipline was published early in September. Letters from individuals and general agencies indicating disagreement with the way some Disciplinary paragraphs were worded began to arrive. Some of the misunderstandings about General Conference actions were due to reporters' versions of what they had heard in legislative committees before there was official action. The legislation concerning local-church apportionments illustrates such confusion. Paragraph 243.10 in the 1976 Book of Discipline says that the charge
conference "shall determine the amount accepted annually ... for World Service and conference benevolences." Through the legislative process, the 1980 Book of Discipline eliminated this possibility. In responding to a pastor who was concerned that "no one seems to remember how the process took place that indeed has changed the Discipline," Ewing T. Wayland, General Secretary of the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA), indicated that some months earlier the Council of Bishops had requested both GCFA and the General Council on Ministries to consider Paragraph 243.10... and to make a recommendation as to whether the language about Charge Conference acceptance of the apportionments should be retained. . . . The General Council on Ministries . . . recommended that the paragraph be amended. . . . The GCFA Legislative Committee . . . decided not to recommend any change.

When Ronald P. Patterson, the Book Editor, entered the exchange of correspondence, he stated that

the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision considered this matter carefully as it related to calendar items #85, #86, and #87. . . . It was the Committee's unanimous decision that each of these calendar items represented two actions: a) non-concurrence with the petitions listed by number in the calendar item and b) acceptance of the material on F-12 of the Advance DCA 1247.11 as amended by the boldface type.

The complicated and lengthy process of getting legislation enacted and the possibility of allowing errors to slip into the Book of Discipline is also reflected in Decision No. 496, made by the Judicial Council on April 24, 1981, and Memorandum No. 499 issued on October 23, 1981. These concerned the status of a new General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (CCUIC)—formerly the Ecumenical and Interreligious Concerns Division (EICD) of the General Board of Global Ministries—and the election of its General Secretary. In a letter dated January 9, 1981, to Paul V. Shearer, a member of the General Council on Ministries who was preparing a brief to the Judicial Council, Robert W. Huston, the commission's General Secretary, wrote:
There was never any intention that a continuing EICD or a new CCUIC not be a program agency. . . . Our legislation was drafted at a time when, as I understood it, the role of General Council on Ministries (GCOM) in electing general secretaries was to be abolished. All the legislation from EICD went through the Board of Global Ministries' (BGM) legislative committee and thence to the inter-agency legislative committee related to GCOM. When the EICD proposals for legislation passed into the hands of the BGM committee the supposition was that all program agencies were to elect their own general secretaries. . . . Whenever that element was not approved . . . no one made the editorial change in the legislation for CCUIC and it was printed thus in the DCA. Thus, when General Conference voted the new Commission into existence, the stipulation of electing its own general secretary was still in the material adopted.

The DCA and the Discipline

The Commission on the General Conference met in January 1981 to begin preparations for the next General Conference to be held in Baltimore. According to "Newscope," the Commission was recommending that verbatim transcriptions not be printed in the Daily Christian Advocate. There was communication between those concerned about the implications of such a possible change, for certainly there had to be some way of recording the detailed actions of a General Conference.

On February 7, 1981, I wrote to Thomas L. Cromwell, chair of the Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order, indicating that a responsible editing of a new Book of Discipline had been hampered, in my opinion, by three things: (1) inadequate information given in calendar items as printed in the DCA; (2) inaccurate titling of petitions; and (3) the assumption by some General Conference delegates, staff of general agencies, and United Methodists at large that the legislative proposals in the Advance Edition of the DCA had special status. I inquired by what authority only the legislative proposals of general agencies were printed and distributed to General Conference delegates. Should not all petitions be treated equally under §607 of the Discipline? In response, Mr. Cromwell expressed similar
concern about the putative special prominence of general-agency proposals.

Errata, Confusion, and the Good Order of the Church

Beginning shortly after the New Year and continuing through the Spring of 1981, various bishops, the Secretary of the General Conference, The United Methodist Publishing House, and members of the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision carried on considerable discussion and correspondence about errors in the 1980 Book of Discipline, errors that made responsible administration extremely difficult. On May 6, 1981, the Council of Bishops requested that an errata sheet be issued. In July 1981, The United Methodist Publishing House reprinted the 1980 Book of Discipline, correcting 14 important errors, including §14 of the Constitution and the list of bishops at the front of the volume. Another paragraph dealing with the rights of Missionary Conferences did not get printed correctly until 1988! Increasingly there was more concern about the whole process of enacting legislation and getting it printed correctly.

During the 1981-1984 quadrennium the General Council on Ministries convened an Interagency Task Force on Legislation under the provisions of §1005.2 “to establish the processes and relationships that will ensure the coordination of the ministries and program emphases of The United Methodist Church through its general agencies and to minimize unnecessary overlapping or conflicting approaches to the local church and the Annual Conferences.” Each program agency was represented by a member and one staff person; administrative agencies sent representatives as observers. The task force received copies of legislative proposals from each agency and checked them for overlap and duplication. However, if agencies differed on proposed legislation, both proposals were submitted and assigned to separate General Conference legislative committees.

At the 1984 General Conference in Baltimore the 1,000 voting delegates received almost 1,000 pages of reports and recommendations and upwards of 15,000 petitions from individuals and organizations within the church! Why was it thought possible to achieve rational decisions about programs, Social Principles, personnel, structure, and administrative details in 11 days? To assist the process there were 26 secretaries and assistant secretaries, a staff
of 11 to provide the verbatim transcription of the proceedings, 22 persons serving the *Daily Christian Advocate*, 129 typewriters, and four copy machines. For the first time there were 19 translators into six languages for official delegates from non-English speaking countries.

**The Secretary and Committee: Harmonizing Challenges**

Since July 1980 I had been assistant to Bishop James M. Ault, Secretary of the Council of Bishops. Immediately prior to the 1984 General Conference, the Council of Bishops met in Wilmington, Delaware. Shortly before the Nominating Committee presented its report to the Council on Thursday, April 26, I was asked if I would allow my name to be put into nomination as Secretary-designate of the General Conference. There was no time to think what this might mean, and I was completely overwhelmed when my name was put before the General Conference and I was elected on Thursday evening, May 10.

But before I could begin to prepare for the 1988 General Conference, there was the 1984 *Book of Discipline* to edit with the other members of the Committee on Correlation on Editorial Revision and the Book Editor. Near the close of the General Conference on Friday night, May 11, 1984, after a discussion about the use of Ministerial Education Funds, Virgil V. Bjork moved “that the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision be authorized to reconcile and bring into harmony all action of this General Conference.” This motion was approved by a two-thirds majority. The committee had been asked to undertake something that the delegates themselves had not been able to resolve! In addition 21 calendar items were not voted on by the 1984 General Conference and were referred to the “3 Cs”: the Council of Bishops, the General Council on Ministries, and the General Council on Finance and Administration.

The Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision met in Nashville, June 25-27, 1984, to make decisions on various confusing items. The committee asked the General Commission on Archives and History to suggest revisions of the Historical Statement for the 1988 *Discipline* and the Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order to consider adding an assistant to the Book Editor as an
ex-officio member of the editorial committee. In answer to queries from individual bishops and general-agency staff and upon the advice of Bishop L. Scott Allen and Dr. Hoover Rupert, Secretary of the Judicial Council, the committee maintained that when a Judicial Council decision affected the Discipline (such as ¶622b and ¶2623.3c), a change could not occur until the legislative process had gone through the next General Conference.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1984, the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision continued to get letters implying that we had more authority for changes of wording in the Discipline than we did. Even after all of this meticulous work, when I received my 1984 Book of Discipline in the Fall, I discovered eight minor errors and a number of wrong references in the Index!

Reorganizing the Secretarial Endeavor

I realized that if I as the Secretary-designate was to be able to recommend changes in the way General Conference operates, I needed to know everything possible about all aspects of the legislative process. So, on March 1, 1985, I gave up other responsibilities to spend full-time in an attempt to improve the way the 1988 General Conference would function as a legislative body. As Secretary of the General Conference I also served as a member of the General Commission on Archives and History and as an ex-officio member of the Commission on the General Conference and the Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order. I attended meetings of all three bodies during the quadrennium, being informed and making suggestions when given opportunities.

The Plan of Organization stated that “the work of the Secretary shall be supervised by the Commission on the General Conference” and managed by the business manager of the General Conference designated by the General Council on Finance and Administration (in accordance with the 1984 Book of Discipline, ¶907.15). Dr. DeWayne S. Woodring was a skilled and efficient business manager with whom I could work very well most of the time but with whom I disagreed when it seemed to me his actions infringed upon the responsibilities of those who had been elected by the General Conference. Dr. Woodring planned the agendas for meetings of both the General Conference Commission and the Committee on Organization and Rules of Order.
and it was difficult at times to get a new item considered.
Understandably Dr. Woodring was concerned about the financial aspects of General Conference, whereas I saw General Conference as a mandated responsibility to be conducted in such a way that official delegates from United Methodism around the world could have "full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional" as the Constitution mandates. I frequently felt that those from outside the continental United States were treated unfairly, even discourteously.

Taking advantage of a family visit to the West Coast, I made appointments with Newell Knudson, who had been General Conference Petition Secretary since 1952, and with young John M. Brawn III, an active United Methodist who was employed in the fast-emerging computer industry. As a result of our conversation John Brawn agreed to write the software to enable a coded petition process, if computer equipment could be purchased. This was all in place by early October 1985. By the time the Interagency Task Force on Legislation met in Chicago on April 22, 1986, a detailed process and timeline had been developed for the group's discussion and approval.

The custom was for the "record of proceedings" in the 
*Daily Christian Advocate* at General Conference to be edited and printed, with additions, to become the official *Journal*. We spent a sleepless night after hearing in a session of the Commission on the General Conference that it was no longer financially feasible to have a *Journal of the General Conference*. After consulting with Dr. Clifford Droke, General Secretary of the General Council on Finance and Administration, I unhappily recommended that the *Daily Christian Advocate*, together with an errata appendix (to be provided by the Secretary of the General Conference) be bound without further editing as a *Journal*.

Job descriptions were written for a secretarial support staff and approved by the Commission. After interviewing a number of persons, I nominated eight for election by the General Conference: Thelma Ballinger Boeder of St. Paul, MN, as Journal Assistant, who worked with the Journal Committee and was liaison to the *Daily Christian Advocate*; John M. Brawn III of Palo Alto, CA, as Computer Assistant, who put in place the first computer system for a General Conference; Merrill W. Drennan of Chevy Chase, MD, as Coordinator of Calendar; Hector J. Grant of San Antonio, TX, as Legislative Assistant, who was my liaison to the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision; D. Jean Hanson of Tacoma, WA, as Office Assistant.
Manager, who scheduled the legislative committees' work for the pool of typists and use of copy machines; Dorothy J. Jordan of Redding, CA, as Petition/Reference Assistant; Hea Sun Kim of Cambridge, MA, as Documents Assistant, who processed all items approved by the General Conference; and Charles Denny White, Jr., of Charlotte, NC, as Parliamentary Assistant, who kept track of all motions on the floor and processed the election of the Judicial Council.

By the time the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision met June 20-23, 1988, I was supplied with suggestions from the secretarial support staff. While in Nashville the Committee wrote a report to the Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order, making 17 observations or recommendations. They all dealt with the necessity for greater cooperation among everyone at a General Conference in order to make the legislative process work better and become more trustworthy.

During the summer of 1988, I processed the Constitutional Amendment to Section VII, Paragraph 35, Article I, and sent all referrals, with accompanying documentation, to the appropriate general agencies. This included a list of 17 Disciplinary paragraphs, which the General Conference had asked be put into effect immediately.

Some delegates to the 1988 General Conference noted that petitions from individual United Methodists did not always get equal treatment. This concern led to a motion from the floor which, when adopted as an amendment and addition to ¶608, required that a copy of all petitions from individuals be provided to each member of a legislative committee. The result was that all 2,433 petitions were printed in the Advance Edition of the Daily Christian Advocate for the 1992 General Conference.

Part of the process of dealing with legislation changed in 1992 with the adoption of a computer program, written by John Brawn, called "Petition Tracking System." In place of a typing pool, one recorder sat in each legislative committee and put data directly into a computer as it was adopted. In an amazingly short time an "automated proofreader" alerted operators to errors. When edited, the Daily Christian Advocate received the copy ready to print (although a very poor index made the later tracking of legislation almost impossible).
A Legislative Process Beyond Fixing

Improvements in the physical workings of General Conference did not correct the problem of dealing responsibly with a massive amount of legislation in a relatively short time in order to produce an accurate Book of Discipline. At every General Conference and throughout the years in between, the term most often used to describe the working of the legislative process is “time-crunch”! Members of general agencies are “squeezed” for time when they meet to approve (at times, unclear) legislative proposals. This means that staff are often left to make crucial decisions. Although delegates may have had time to read the voluminous Advance Editions, as well as all the other promotional material sent to them, there is little time during the few days of a General Conference for serious reflection on the implications of any legislation. Afterwards “there is sometimes difficulty in knowing just what the General Conference (and its Legislative Committees) has done with some of the petitions.”

In 1992 I attended General Conference as an observer, for in September 1990 I had again become administrative assistant to Bishop James K. Mathews. Before leaving for Louisville, I was asked by the bishops to provide them with a summary of General Conference actions “as soon as possible after May 15.” In preparation I went through the Advance Edition of the Daily Christian Advocate and, as I indicated in a letter to Senior Editor Ronald P. Patterson, “many [of the petitions] ... are in violation of Paragraph 608.2.” I had submitted 12 petitions to General Conference, recommending that the wording of the Constitution be updated to conform to the action of the 1988 General Conference that changed terminology in the Book of Discipline. All except those concerned with ¶37 and 53 were approved.

On August 10, 1992, I wrote C. David Lundquist, General Secretary of the General Council on Ministries, enclosing a summary of General Conference action, noting that 85 petitions (not including those dealing with the Discipline) were not acted on; did not show up on a Consent Calendar even though eligible; or did not get to the floor for a vote. I was unable to find in print two other petitions associated with Calendar items 809 and 955. And 65 petitions regarding legislative proposals for the ordering of ministry were referred to the Council of Bishops, in accordance with the conclusion of a debate held on May 23, 1992.
Although it indicated that there were "no sweeping changes," the Plan of Organization and Rules of Order which received ambiguous approval27 by the 1996 General Conference made two changes that might improve the legislative process. First, a new Section V on Nominations and Elections requires the Secretary of the General Conference to develop a timeline for the submission of nominations. It also requires that attention be given to ensuring "continuity of membership," the reason being that replacing people who are cognizant with the inner workings of a General Conference has sometimes led to confusion rather than responsible legislation.

The second change was an addition to Section XI.B. This change gives authority to those editing the Book of Discipline, "in consultation with the Judicial Council, . . . to delete provisions . . . which have been ruled unconstitutional." This process makes it possible to provide the correct provisions in United Methodism's "Book of Law" much sooner than previously.

It is the four persons appointed by the Council of Bishops to the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision, plus the Book Editor, the Secretary of the General Conference, and the Publisher, who become the editorial agents of the General Conference once that body adjourns. After checking each step of the legislative process for each item, harmonizing language where necessary, those designated agents produce a Book of Discipline quadrennially.28 Their decisions may be challenged in writing, even forwarded to the Judicial Council, and "any established errata . . . shall be forwarded by The United Methodist Publishing House to the Council of Bishops."29

For more than three decades, United Methodism's General Conference made a steady effort to improve the inner workings of the legislative process. Although some changes may be necessary every four years, one wonders whether the General Conference should tinker with the denomination's structure at every level; scrutinize every word of the Discipline; and seek to legislate every minute process. American Methodism started with a pocket-size Discipline. On the other hand, United Methodism's first Book of Discipline reached 596 pages; and its most recent 742 pages. When is enough enough?
A Personal Word

As agencies and individuals prepare legislation for the General Conference of 2000, they need to spend time and effort to get material submitted correctly and printed only in cases where changes are truly needed. Delegates should not be faced with more material than they can reasonably vote on in the time allotted. The need for the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision to guess or interpret the intentions of General Conference should be kept to a minimum. That is the only way to produce a Book of Discipline that truly reflects the proper role of a General Conference.

Notes


2. This became the Fund for Reconciliation. In his autobiography being published by The United Methodist Publishing House, Bishop Mathews tells the story of getting this resolution passed by General Conference.


4. Throughout this essay, when speaking of producing a "Book of Discipline," I generally refer to Parts II-V. The paste-up version of the 1972 "Book of Discipline" is in the Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.

5. Other members were Bishop L. Scott Allen, John K. Bergland, and Alvin J. Lindgren. Emory S. Bucke was Book Editor.


9. Often general-agency staff, who may have actually written the proposed legislation, vociferously lobby legislative committee members.

10. The Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision later agreed that when a calendar item approved on the Consent Calendar or under an omnibus vote was found to be in conflict with parts of another calendar item discussed and voted upon at a plenary session, the item discussed and voted would prevail.

11. This practice, discontinued in 1984 and 1988, was reinstated in 1992 and 1996, according to Earl W. Riddle, who chaired the committee. Other members of the 1992 committee were Naomi G. Bartle, Joseph Graham, and Hobart Hilyard with Ronald P. Paterson, Book Editor. Other members of the 1996 committee were Naomi G. Bartle, Richard L. Evans, and Celia Hendrix with Harriet Jane Otten, Book Editor.
12. These were: (1) titles of petitions assigned by the Petitions Secretary should reflect the contents as accurately as possible; (2) the Advance DCA coordinated by the Interagency Task Force on Legislation should indicate more clearly the beginning and ending of each petition; (3) the Book Editor should have major input in the training of newly elected legislative-committee officers; (4) someone should be assigned to keep a chronological and cross-referenced record of each calendar item; (5) a better procedure for "omnibus" motions should be developed; and (6) the person indexing the Daily Christian Advocate should have been at the facilities and have ready access to materials in order to produce more timely alphabetical and topical listings.

13. The bishops' request may have been made on July 14, 1978, in Chicago, at one of the meetings of officers of the three councils. Present were: Ralph T. Alton, James K. Mathews, and R. Marvin Stuart from the Council of Bishops; H. Ellis Finger, Jr., Ellen Hanna, Paul W. Milhouse and Ewing T. Wayland from the General Council on Finance and Administration; Richard W. Cain, Norman E. Doveire, John T. King, Charles B. Purlish, and W. McFerrin Stowe from the General Council on Ministries.

14. These statistics were provided by DeWayne S. Woodring, Business Manager, at a pre-General Conference press briefing in November 1983.


16. By addition, deletion, substitution, change in terminology or rearrangement of 413 paragraphs, the 1984 General Conference changed about 92 percent of the Disciplinary provisions in the "Organization and Administration" of the denomination. Of the paste-up version of 464 pages, only 49 had no changes!

17. The United Methodist Publishing House has funded such meetings each quadrennium. According to Earl W. Riddle, Chair of the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision for 1988, 1992, and 1996, the Commission on the General Conference has not been willing to finance a meeting of the committee since January 1987. In a letter dated 22 March, 1999, Riddle notes that unless the chair in 2000 "assumes a lot of responsibility for setting up the work of the committee prior to General Conference, there could be chaos."

18. In 1988 there was a futile attempt via a petition from the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (pages C64-65, Advance Edition, Daily Christian Advocate) to make the Commission on General Conference and its Business Manager part of the Disciplinary provisions of a General Conference.

19. This new process enabled the cartons of duplicate petitions (generally on societal issues such as alcohol prohibition or abortion) to be considered as one. The Commission on the General Conference also asked John Brawn to set up the first electronic voting system at a General Conference.

20. The paragraphs were 272, 505, 626, 628, 635, 705, 805, 905, 920, 924, 931, 1204, 1412, 1517, 2006, 2614.

21. The motion was made by Becky L. Buie of Columbia, SC, treasurer of the South Carolina Annual Conference; see Daily Christian Advocate, 6 May, 1988, 595f.

22. John Brawn updated the computer program further for 1996. Tracking-system personnel attempted to produce the updated status of each petition and/or calendar item, but this procedure became overtaxed due to time pressure.


24. He had written me on 17 September, 1991, asking if I would help track
legislation. My letter dated 20 March, 1988, also noted that "many duplicate petitions appear" which indicated that the process set up in 1988 had not been continued.

25. Calendar Item 1782/Petition 662 included duplicates from the General Board of Discipleship, the Memphis Annual Conference, and the National Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders. It asked that throughout the Book of Discipline "minister" and "ministerial" refer to all believers, and clergy be identified as "ordained ministers," "pastors," or "clergy." The discussion and approval of the calendar item is found on pages 706-707, Daily Christian Advocate, 7 May, 1988.


28. The Book of Discipline is in English. Translations, e.g. Korean, are sometimes published for use by United Methodists where English is not their native tongue. Central Conferences also have the authority to edit and publish a non-English Discipline (§537.21; also see §286.6 and §537.33). Affiliated autonomous Methodist churches or affiliated united churches are responsible for preparing their own Disciplines (§548.3).

29. See "Plan of Organization," XI.B.
Paul L. Escamilla

Pentecost and Then: Waiting with the Spirit

A Word about Culminating Days and Pentecost

Some worship leaders may choose to depart from the norm and take up the Epistle reading from Romans 8, rather than Acts 2, as the lead text for preaching and worship on Pentecost. In such a case, they would do well, for reasons that will become clear as we look more closely at that text, to reflect on the nature of what I would call "culminating days" in the liturgical calendar. Principal among these days are Christmas/Epiphany, Easter/Pentecost, and Reign of Christ Sunday.

Among its many lessons, the Christian year teaches us that the emotions pertaining to its seasons are, as in life, accrued rather than replaced. Advent hope, yearning, and expectancy lead to Christmas joy and consummation; but rather than dismissing now these former emotions upon arrival at the culminating day or days, the church makes room for them along with these others. Likewise, Lenten orientations and practices of self-examination and service are not replaced, finally, but complemented and even held in tension with Easter's news and experience of liberation, triumph, and reward.

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The Reign of Christ Sunday illustrates well this same reality—situated as it is at the very doorstep of the liturgical year's beginning in Advent. The former observance (Reign of Christ Sunday) heralds the good ending of the great story—the sovereign Christ, now all and in all, reigning always and forever. The latter (Advent), commencing only days later and employing remarkably similar idioms, signals the beginning of a search across the horizon for the coming of One whose absence is felt only too keenly, who will then reign in the way just proclaimed and rehearsed days earlier. Through this mysterious rhythm within sacred time and space, and its reflection in human experience, the *already* and the *not yet* are invited over and again to live not just as neighbors but under the same roof—indeed, inside the same skin.

Pentecost shares this dialectical quality with these other culminating days. The church universally understands the day of Pentecost as a day of culmination, arrival, conclusion. "The crown and seal of the Easter season," we have over the centuries called that fiftieth day of Easter, completes the completing season. It marks the occasion on which the much-anticipated gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in earnest upon followers of the risen Christ. Everything anticipated is now realized; everything promised, given. As suddenly, as the rush of a mighty wind, the bereft have become the fertile and the joyous celebration of life in the Spirit begins. The long, long wait is finally over!

Or is it? Romans 8:18-27 presents us with a rather different Pentecostal message, and the Epistle reading for the Sunday following Pentecost will do its part to color in that picture. The Epistle lections for the two following Sundays will also contribute, and generously, to the church's awareness that life in the Spirit is still life between the times. The Spirit is given to us, and yet more waiting is in order. We celebrate, to be sure, but what we celebrate is that which is here, yet not quite here—what is won but not completely given over, what is ours but still just beyond reach. The gift of the Spirit, seen from this Pauline vantage point, will be seen as a gift as much for enabling a certain yearning as for satisfying that yearning.

To prepare worship and preaching within such a context requires a certain acknowledgment before the church—and as the church—that even as Spirit-filled believers we are not yet all that we would be. Journeys continue beyond mountaintop destinations; and, liturgically speaking, the "ordinary" in Ordinary Time is not merely a catchall term. In reference to the season after Pentecost, Ordinary Time
describes the regular arrangement of life; that is, the ongoing, lifelong vocation of practicing daily faithfulness. This vocation calls for stepping out with pedestrian faith to love in both difficult and routine ways, for some measure of courage to forgive both eventfully and as a lifestyle, and for a certain gift of vision to see the world through new creation eyes. Finally, Ordinary Time is the season to practice the surrender of both our deeds and our misdeeds to a God who, through times ordinary and otherwise, promises an ultimate mending of trespassed time into a stitched-up shalom we can for now hopefully imagine, provisionally practice, and earnestly pray for with sighs too deep for words.

**June 11, 2000—Pentecost: The Day with Feathers**

*Romans 8:22-27*

Acts 2:1-21
Ps. 104:24-34, 35b
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Emily Dickinson once referred to hope as “the thing with feathers.” The image presents hope as palpable, living, and earthy but at the same time immaterial, ethereal, and fleeting. From such a full-bodied, yet elusive metaphor comes a helpful reflection on Pentecost as given to us by this text. Pentecost has surely come; and yet the great fiftieth day functions not entirely as consummation but also as an underscoring of the weight of our longing. Nearly every verse contains or suggests this dialectic between the given and the anticipated:

- v. 22: *until now/whole creation has been groaning*
- v. 23: *who have the first fruits of the Spirit/groan inwardly as we wait*
- v. 24: *in hope we were saved/who hopes for what is seen?*
- v. 25: *hope/wait . . . with patience*
- v. 26: *the Spirit helps us/we do not know how to pray*

A survey of the verses that canopy this pericope reveals a similar structure:

- vv. 18-19: *the sufferings of this present time/the glory about to be*
revealed . . . for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God

• vv. 20-21: creation was subjected to futility/in hope . . . set free . . . obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God

For Paul, the Spirit-event is about both what has been given and what is yet to be given. And yet the dynamic he presents and the role of the Spirit within it are more nuanced than can be conveyed by a simple one-dimensional already—not yet continuum. Paul sees the gift of the Spirit not as one side of a two-sided polarity but as the weaver of yearning and fulfillment, anticipation and culmination. The Spirit is the agent both of satisfaction and of our ability to identify and express unsatisfaction. In this respect, “the thing with feathers”—that is, hope—plays a role in both dimensions of our experience, binding the given realities and the sought-for realities into a unified anticipation of God’s shalom.

From the vantage point of Romans 8, Pentecost is the gift of the Spirit by which we taste and see, provisionally, the goodness of God and God’s new order (v. 23). This gift enables us to yearn, and yearn fittingly, for more (vv. 26-27). “The Spirit helps us in our weakness . . .” By vanquishing that weakness? No, by assisting us in praying, by interceding for us. The gift of the Spirit, as suggested by these verses, is a gift whose provision is that of sharing the longing and helping us, in George Herbert’s words, “to paraphrase the soul.”

That very Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” The Greek word for sigh is akin to “groaning,” very close to the groaning of v. 23, and suggestive of creation’s “eager longing” (v. 19) and “groaning” (v. 22). The Spirit shares the world’s primordial and utterly present idiom of longsuffering and deep aspiration and enables us to articulate these emotions and longings in all their inability to be articulated by praying through us in sighs that lie beyond words.

I have a suspicion that hidden in these verses are the makings of a theology of the musical tradition we call “the blues,” in which music swells and dives, labors and languishes, sings and moans both to express emotion and to refuse comment. If we were to look for a way to understand offering silent presence in the face of suffering, this would be a good place to look. And if we were to attempt the impossible—holding together song and silence, feast day and moaning day, Spirit as praiseworthy gift and as unwordable longing.
bird in hand and bird just beyond reach—this text would be the place to try, and Pentecost the day on which to try it.

June 18, 2000—Trinity Sunday: The Tether of the Spirit
Romans 8:12-17
Isa. 6:1-8
Ps. 29
John 3:1-17

If we have assumed that Trinity Sunday was about treating an esoteric theological subject of little relevance to congregational life, this text should present us with a fresh understanding of the day and its homiletic possibilities. From beginning to end, Paul’s references to the three persons of the Trinity are practical and anthropological. These give us a window on the Godhead that opens out from the individual person—and, by extension, the church—rather than starting from a purely conceptual or philosophical point of reference.

Paul’s central placement of human existence and experience is clear from the first lines of the text, where he casts the terms of the human situation and its divine intervention: “So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh . . . but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (vv. 12-13). Paul is presenting the fundamental human dilemma as life versus death. This orientation is carried over from the preceding section (8:1-11), built as it is upon the gathering logic of the letter so far. Already Paul has established that those who are “in Christ Jesus” are free from condemnation and death (8:1). By living and walking “according to the Spirit” (vv. 4-5), setting “the mind on the things of the Spirit” (vv. 5-6), and being “in the Spirit” (v. 9), life emerges and may be sustained. The human experience of deliverance from death to new life becomes the centerpiece for the current discussion of the Trinity.

If Romans 8:22-27 was chosen for preaching at Pentecost, then the congregation has already been introduced to the idea that for Paul the Holy Spirit is understood to have a central role in our spiritual lives. The current pericope allows the opportunity to further develop that concept. As we have seen above, it is the Spirit who enables the person to know “life and peace” (v. 6) in a daily sense and “life” (v. 11), in an eschatological sense. For Paul, the Spirit is a catalyst for putting to death the deeds of the body (v. 13), a guide for “fleshing out” such choices and
practices (v. 14). Further, Paul portrays the Spirit as a co-intercessor (see Rom. 8:26), in this instance praying in our praying, "bearing witness" with our spirit that we are children of God.

This last description of the Spirit's work in us is perhaps Paul's most palpable—and certainly his most poetic. "Abba! Father!" we cry, including ourselves in the universal company of those great and small across the ages who have sought succor, rescue, comfort, assurance, kinship, intimacy, faith. A singular survivor of the crossover of the tradition from Aramaic to Greek, naming God as "Abba" links the Christian community to Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord (see also Gal. 4:6-7). We will remember how Jesus employed the ascription at Gethsemane as his hour of suffering drew near (Mark 14:36). The fact that it is the Spirit (in Galatians, "the Spirit of his Son") who speaks this acclamation with us—indeed, enables us to speak it at all—confirms the integral role of the Spirit in binding us to God the Father and Jesus the Christ.

What, precisely, is the tether that draws us to God the Father and to Christ crucified and risen as we say by the Spirit, "Abba! Father!"? It is the experience of suffering or longing (see again 8:26), almost audible beneath the very speaking of the Aramaic name itself; almost audible, and certainly eased. To cry "Abba!" Paul explains, is to bear witness to our status as children of God and heirs with Christ. But of what are we heirs? Glory, certainly (v. 17), if we first suffer with Christ. The original point of reference for the Aramaic prayer name is not, after all, at the Jordan River in Jesus' baptism, on the mountain at his transfiguration, or at a meal with his friends after the Resurrection. It is with Jesus alone at Gethsemane, the garden of anguish—the place of begging off the cross that looms in the distance, and, ultimately, of surrendering to God's will. To cry "Abba! Father!" is to move, by the Spirit, toward that same surrender of ourselves into God's care and provision; it is to choose, again by the Spirit, to walk in the direction of our dual inheritance—suffering and glorification—in Christ. To name God in this way reinforces both our call to costly discipleship and our claim upon God's ultimate deliverance.

These two texts from Romans 8 would teach us that when the Spirit is involved in our praying an integration occurs between yearning and hope (8:22-27), suffering and glory (8:12-17). At one level, the Spirit draws us into Jesus' own praying and toward the God he called Abba as we claim God as listener to our suffering and ultimate giver of
peace. At another level that integration weaves memory and hope, experience and anticipation, sighing and singing, lament and praise.

In her book *Words That Sing*, Gail Ramshaw reminds us that praise and lament are of a piece in the church’s praying. Praise leads into lament, lament to praise. Together these are two folds in the same tapestry, the warp and woof of the work of the people in worship. Into which category, lament or praise, fall the “sighs too deep for words” (8:26) and the cry of “Abba! Father!”? Both, of course. No more profound participation in the human experience can be possible than to allow the Spirit to hold together in our praying and living both lament and praise; no more profound participation in human experience, or in the Trinity.

June 25, 2000—Second Sunday after Pentecost: The Merciless Grasp of Grace

2 Cor. 6:1-13

1 Sam. 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49
Ps. 9:9-20
Mark 4:35-41

The force of the text before us rests upon the assertion just presented in vv. 14-21 of the previous chapter: the presence in the world of a divine reconciling agency which is at once perpetual and inexorable. Paul will draw upon both of these characteristics in the forthcoming appeal to the Corinthians to make a gift to the church at Jerusalem. He will argue that the work of God goes forward still, without resistance of any ultimate sort. Together these dynamic qualities of God’s reconciling work become the basis for Paul’s plea.

The chapter begins with a word that is a favorite for Paul, with 18 uses in this letter alone. The word is *urge*, from the Greek root, *parakaleo*. It suggests meanings of “appeal,” “encourage,” and “console” and reflects a Pauline rhetorical preference (usually implied, though sometimes outwardly stated; see, for instance, 8:8a) for coaxing over coercing. That Paul chooses to urge rather than to demand does not reduce the intensity of his appeal or his determination to achieve his goal. Rather, Paul writes as though the imperatives are already in force. He has merely to point to them, not recreate them, to engage their leverage. In this instance, Paul asks the Corinthians merely to recognize what cannot be overlooked, to do
what must be done, to accept what cannot be refused: the imperative gift of “the grace of God” (v. 1).

In the present case, “the grace of God” is a general reference to the whole reconciling work of God in Christ and through the Pauline apostolate, all of which has been the subject of 5:14-21. Paul’s very phrasing, namely, that the Corinthians not receive this grace in vain, suggests the fundamental givenness of the thing received. Grace is not open to question; it cannot be turned on or off by the recipient like a television from the remote. As someone has said about grits on a breakfast plate in the South, you don’t order grits or not order grits—grits just comes! Paul goes a step further, understanding grace as a definitive gift that cannot necessarily even be returned by rejection or refusal. At worst, it may be received “in vain,” or more literally, “emptily.” On this basis, he challenges the Corinthians to feel the true weight of their beholdenness to God and to those who are God’s ambassadors (5:20) for a gift which is already and irrefutably theirs.

Paul draws upon Isaiah (49:8a) to underscore his own sense of urgency and chooses, for emphasis, to echo the prophet’s poetic device of parallelism in his own application of the text: “See . . . now! See . . . now!” (v. 2). Repetition only underscores the fact that nothing inhibits his readers from seeing, and appropriating now, the divine gift of grace—nothing; and certainly, Paul will proceed to make abundantly clear, not the Apostle himself.

Whether Paul is, in the lyrical section which follows (vv. 3-10), waxing too rhapsodic in his effort toward moral persuasion is the subject of varied opinion. In examples of Paul’s tracts of self-presentation occurring elsewhere in the letters, Paul reinforces a claim to persuasive authority based on self-diminution in suffering, reputation in strength, or simply downright earnestness. Is this merely another such litany? And what is its intended effect?

A reference in the previous chapter to the influence of the divine work upon Paul may suggest how we interpret the elaborate self-referencing in these verses. In 5:13 we recognize antitheses which, perhaps not incidentally, are close in form to those in the current segment. In this earlier context, Paul is explaining why he (and, by suggestion, the other apostles) may be found either “beside ourselves” or “in our right mind.” In v. 14a he supplies his answer: “The love of Christ urges us on.” The Greek verb synecho, here translated as “urge,” has a range of meanings in its New Testament usage and beyond, including “surround,” “hem in,” “hold,” “cover,” “occupy,” and “constrain.” Paul’s only other use of the word (in Phil.
1:23) offers yet another meaning: the passive sense of “to be hard pressed.” The verb has, in other words, a rather significant functional range. It may suggest either possession or undergirding, or it may mean surrounding. Taken together, and in the present context, synecho appears to mean a force whose affect on Paul and the apostles is one of binding by benevolence, constraining by affection, laying claim in love. One easily recalls a similar allusion in the Gospels, when Jesus longs to gather the children of Jerusalem as the hen gathers her brood (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34).

We'll recognize right away the similarity between the “urging” of Christ toward the apostles and the “urging” of Paul toward the church. It seems altogether clear that what Paul intends through the elaborations of vv. 4-10 (as well as in the larger pericope of vv. 1-13) is merely an extension of this dynamic of grace as he himself has experienced it. The previous section of his letter is replete with evidence of this understanding of extension (see 5:19, 20, 21). Notice also the fact that Paul himself couples the urging of Christ and his own in a bridge phrase in 6:1: “work[ing] together with him . . . .” The Greek word for “work together,” sunergomai, has lent us the word “synergy” to describe amplified results when two or more share work effectively. More than even extension is at work here. By the very presence of Christ within him and the agency of Christ through him, Paul is seeking to bring the Corinthians to a full acceptance of and response to the tenacious grace of God.

Therefore, if by posturing or poetics Paul must become a holy annoyance to his readers, an extension and partner of the dynamic of synecho-grace in their midst, he will do so—if it may result in their generosity. Such willingness is Paul’s calling card, and he proffers it often. The clearest example comes at the opening of 1 Corinthians (1:17ff), where he ascribes foolishness to his proclamation, all for the sake of saving those who are willing to believe. (See also, for example, Phil. 1:18; 1 Cor. 9:19-22.) The Apostle willingly endures self-abasement to get the gospel across. It was, after all, with the pedigree of a reigning religious inquisitor that he first came groping blindly into the apostle’s role (Acts 9). Ever after he was willing to display that blended identity of confidence man and bumbler, of “this is the way it is,” and “what do I know?” If, when Saul needed a new name, “Paul” had not been so convenient, “Articulate Stumbler” would have suited him well.

In *Life Is Beautiful*, the poignant and widely acclaimed Italian film starring Roberto Benigni, Benigni plays a brilliantly witty Jewish
father living in Nazi Germany with his wife and young son. The father does all he can to protect his son from the horrors they face together in the concentration camp where they are eventually imprisoned. His protective antics are foolish, exaggerated, deceptive, contorted, zany, and profoundly empassioned. Benigni’s character is a clown on a mission, turning himself inside out with his elaborate and indefatigable charade in order to shield his son from the evil terrors that surround them and to bring the child through alive. The Greek verb from 5:14 that we explored earlier, synecho, finds its full range of meanings embodied in this figure.

And if we’re honest, the word shows up in us as well. Parents wait up half the night, worried silly about where their children are, the same children they once fed in a high chair by turning a baby spoon full of spinach into an airplane. Friends surround a friend suffering addiction to say “Enough,” making fools of everyone involved for the sake of saving a life. Pastors make the rounds in the week’s work, and sometimes the rounds bear a resemblance to a circus wheel—meetings, hospital calls, home visits, children’s chapel time, sermon study, crisis calls, newsletter, Rotary club, worship planning, worship leading, paperwork—and then all over again. Other workers in the church teach and lead and serve; make phone calls; organize a work day; chaperone a lock-in; invite a friend to worship; prepare a lesson; arrange the chairs; turn the lights out; give up evenings, weekends, and free time; growing old for the sake of life together and the kingdom. The synecho-grace word shows up in us as well.

If Paul were on screen, or at least visible among us, would we size him up similarly? Now he stumbles toward Damascus after being struck blind; now he calls himself the fool, the least of the apostles, the chief of sinners; now he boasts of adventures and misadventures, rapture and humiliation; now he rebukes another apostle, chastens himself, grows stern with his readers, then tender again. Now he describes himself as a nursing mother, the readers as his children, and so on—all behaviors of one who has experienced, and is compelled to share, the unyielding, merciless grasp of grace.

“Our heart is wide open to you, Corinthians,” he concludes, and can there be any doubting it? “In return, open wide your hearts also.”
Paul has bent over backward for the Corinthians, an extension of his own experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ (see notes on 6:1-13). His expectation now is that the Corinthians will themselves do what is obvious—respond in like measure to that experience of grace. In this passage Paul sets his vision of their response before them, as if to lure them toward that end for which he sees they are clearly intended.

A centerpiece of Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians, and of his christology more broadly considered, is stated in this passage in verse 9: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Here and elsewhere Paul employs the notion of christological abasement to express or interpret the believer’s status as rich, or righteous, or blessed (see Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21). Morna Hooker has called this a dynamic of “interchange,” in which we become righteous, rich, or blessed, in the spiritual sense of these terms, finally not in place of Christ but along with Christ.

I would suggest that we can understand Hooker’s notion of interchange within a somewhat broader functional framework here, in which one thing or state of things is understood to be drawn up into another thing or state of things by their juxtaposition. I shall identify the strata of interchange as what is and what is desirable, that is, Corinthian and alter-Corinthian:

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<th>Corinthian</th>
<th>alter-Corinthian</th>
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<td>the Macedonians’ generosity</td>
<td>the Corinthians’ intentions (vv. 1-6)</td>
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<td>the Corinthians’ intention</td>
<td>the Corinthians’ concrete action (vv. 10-12)</td>
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<td>earnestness of the apostle(s)</td>
<td>the Corinthians’ potential of generous giving (v. 7b)</td>
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<td>the Corinthians’ abundance</td>
<td>Jerusalem’s need (vv. 13-14a)</td>
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<td>Jerusalem’s hypothetical abundance</td>
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Rather than being merely a centerpiece, the christological phrase in verse 9 becomes the centerpoint of various lines and degrees of rhetoric, all of which move toward the one central and foundational reality: Christ is poor, you are rich. It may be that we are to give because we are moved by others' generosity, or because our intentions are overly long and action upon those intentions overdue, or because others' earnestness for our action is compelling, or because we have and others need and the opposite may one day be the case. These reasons are morally influential and empirically substantiable; they are even emotionally moving. As such, they draw us to respond the way one singer lures another to the song, one dancer coaxes another to the dance. The alter-Corinthian subject within each pairing above is the Corinthian church at its best, as if to suggest by sometimes subtle and sometimes rather pointed contrast, "This is you," and then, "This is you, generous."

Paul's form of appeal epitomizes the notion that the preacher's task is not to get people to do but to get them to see. The resulting dynamic is itself a kind of interchange. In each instance the other subject in the pairing is or has become what Paul repeatedly suggests the Corinthians aspire to be. In every case the goal of the interchange is the same as that of the central christological motif: that the Corinthians may become rich (in generosity toward Jerusalem).

Yet Paul's best claim upon the Corinthians, the christological phrase in verse 9, fits none of the above categories of efficacy—moral, rational, or emotional binding. This central figure of interchange is of a metaphysical sort. While abstruse, it is nonetheless, and somewhat paradoxically, quite apprehensible: the grace of God, or the love of Christ, delivers us from our impoverishment. "You know it," Paul claims, as though this mystical reality were more like common knowledge than rocket science.

In a sense, of course, it is. To be loved is half the equation of our lives and our life together in community, and we know better than we know anything else that to be loved is to be made rich. We know one thing more, that there is a natural response to being loved that happens to be the other half of the equation—that is, to love in return.

W.H. Auden once wrote a poem with Pentecost in mind, entitled "Whitsunday in Kirchstetten." In its closing lines we find that foundational understanding upon which Paul bases not only his appeal to the Corinthians but likely his entire ministry—as we likely do ours.

What do I know, except what everyone knows—
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.
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