

General Administration

THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Connectional Table Summary Update to Quadrennial Report

Much has changed since 2019 when the 2020 report, found on pages 629-635 of the 2020-*ADCA*, was prepared for General Conference. This summary provides an update to the Connectional Table (CT) report. The report in the *ADCA* was a snapshot of where the work of the CT was at that time.

The pandemic stopped many things but, thanks to the hard work of then-chair Bishop Christian Alsted and then-Chief Connectional Ministries Officer, Bishop Kennetha Bingham-Tsai, ministry continued during the pandemic.

Identity, Vision, Connectionalism, and Mission

In the spring of 2021, while the world struggled to emerge from the grips of the pandemic, the Connectional Table began to explore conversations around identity, vision, connectionalism, and mission. Emerging from these exchanges were questions about how global regionalization within The United Methodist Church might look and how it might be shaped by vision. Two main projects emerged in this work: the “Tuesdays at the Table” series and regional conversations around the world.

Tuesdays at the Table

“Tuesdays at the Table” presented a series of interviews with scholars affiliated with The UMC, who presented foundational elements of Wesleyan and United Methodist theology, including Wesley’s conception of grace, the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, and the sacraments. These interviews drew on foundational documents within our theological tradition, from “Our Theological Task” to “Grace Upon Grace: The Mission Statement of The United Methodist Church.” The interviews are still available on our website and are well worth your time to listen. Collaboration among our agencies was essential to this work. Each video was paired with a discussion guide compiled by our colleagues at Higher Education and Ministry and the segments, recorded and produced by UMCOM, premiered on The United Methodist Church’s Facebook page.

Imagine the Future: Regional Conversations

“Imagine the Future” inspired the regional conversations held in Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and the USA. From the beginning, the plan was for this work to be done regionally, with

participants indigenous to the area. Each region would develop a foundational Context document that explained contextual considerations influencing the process they designed. Following a series of conversations or surveys, the regional committee would present their findings to the Connectional Table. Each group developed their own questions related to the categories of identity, vision, connectionalism, and mission.

Identity

While some of the work is ongoing, we look forward to sharing what emerged from the conversations more fully in the fall of 2023 and as we move toward General Conference. Briefly, several recurring themes emerged throughout each category across the regional conversations. The key words that emerged relating to the identity of The United Methodist Church included “Wesleyan,” “Grace,” and “Mission-oriented,” as well as “anxiety” and “disunity.” The wide spectrum of identity is indicative of an inherent tension that emerged throughout this work. In our current moment, that tension is felt at many different levels throughout the Connection. It is significant to note that our Wesleyan roots and the centrality of grace are seen as essential to the identity of United Methodists. Another significant theme within our identity is the role of ecumenism. Many participants felt that collaboration with our Christian siblings in other denominations is essential for the continued work of The UMC. In the report from the European region were these words: “There is a danger of becoming inward looking and narrow in our perspectives.” Ecumenism counters this tendency toward inward focus.

Vision

When discussing vision, common themes were “biblically based,” “engaged in service to the community,” and “inclusivity.” The image of a “Big Tent” church emerged repeatedly—a church with room for everyone. For some this meant explicitly full inclusion for LGBTQ+ siblings. For others, it meant including and appreciating our more conservative members. Many hoped for a more adaptive polity, expressed both in a desire for regionalization and the ability to provide a nimble response to a global crisis such as the Covid pandemic. The postponed General Conference brought questions about how we function between General Conferences. The question was asked, “How can General Conference and the *Book of Disci-*

pline serve and support the mission and ministry of the church rather than bind and inhibit us in that work?” The vision of regional polity was expressed specifically in how the denomination can be less colonial and US-centered, with more regional autonomy and authority. The need for contextual worship services and ministries was emphasized.

Connectionalism

Connectionalism, specifically viewed within our international nature, was seen as a blessing and a challenge. Connectionalism gives us a structure for partnership in mission and counteracts our inward focus. It binds us together in ways that reflect the kingdom of God. But when General Conference speaks for the whole church, particularly when those decisions are made by small margins in a contentious setting, vision and mission can be in jeopardy. There is hope that regionalization would mitigate these challenges and sustain the gift of connectionalism.

Mission

Nowhere was the enthusiasm higher than in the discussion of mission. Across the regions, people expressed that The UMC is called to connect people to God by sharing Christ’s love and witnessing to Christ’s saving grace. We journey alongside, advocate with, and respond to the needs of the marginalized. We are called to fight poverty, reject racism, reject nationalism, empower women, address food insecurity and health, and offer welcome to immigrants and refugees. Throughout the Connection, participants recognized discipleship as central to the mission of The UMC.

The good news is that throughout the Connection, participants experienced The United Methodist Church as a place of transformation, grace, and love. To draw on the language of *Grace Upon Grace: The Mission Statement of The United Methodist Church*, The UMC continues to live into its call of “lives changed by grace, a church formed by grace, and a world transformed by grace.”

Legislative Goals

Regionalization

The USRC legislation (Petitions 20722, 20723, 20724, 20725, 20726, *ADCA* pp. 312, 323, 324, 373, 374) as outlined in our 2019 report in the *ADCA* page 632, would create a regional conference for the United States. The writers of the Christmas Covenant incorporated that legislation into their proposal, which has gained support throughout the entire Connection. The Connectional Table and the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters have coordinated the effort to adapt regional legislation to be submitted by the Standing Committee as petitions to General Conference. (Petition 20XXX, *ADCA* p. XXX) [Not Yet Titled; submitted by StCCCM]. The collabora-

tion among the many groups who desire regionalization has involved hard work, deep listening, and a willingness to come to a common understanding. It has been an example of the best of our Connection. The Connectional Table will continue to have conversations throughout the church that will allow delegates to be informed about this groundbreaking legislation and the gift that it can bring to the denomination.

Makeup of the Connectional Table

A second piece of legislation from the CT (Petition 20XXX, *ADCA* p. XXX) [Restructuring of Connectional Table Membership, submitted by Judi Kenaston] is a pattern for a more representative Connectional Table. The proposal expands regional representation of the CT and is a step toward a less US-centric governance. This legislation allows for greater diversity for the CT and will allow for all regions to bring their voices to the table.

Working Toward Missional Effectiveness

Evaluation

Our Agency Evaluation Advisory Group is continuing its work in assessing the agency alignment with missional priorities and spending plans. The CT hosted an in-person conversation with the Agency Presidents and General Secretaries and have had follow-ups on Zoom. The agencies continue to find ways to work together and share services.

Values-Based Budget

Our values-based budgeting process allowed the CT to work through some difficult decisions presented by necessary reductions in money for allocations to agencies. The CT developed a budget proposal to allocate \$267,225,000 determined in collaboration with GCFA. The budget proposal was approved by the CT and GCFA jointly in a May 2023 meeting and will be presented by both groups at General Conference.

Conclusion

The Connectional Table is in the unique position of bringing all the partners together as we work with the Council of Bishops to define the vision of the church. We must keep our focus on the mission and ministries and make sure that the resources that are so precious are used to fulfill that vision. At a time of uncertainty, when other groups are seeking to define The UMC, this work is critical. The CT is committed to listening for and clarifying God’s claim upon the people called United Methodists.

Bishop Mande Muyombo,
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