

THE CONNECTIONAL TABLE

REPORT TO GENERAL CONFERENCE

*The table is a meeting place
a gathering ground,
the source of sustenance and nourishment,
festivity, safety, and satisfaction.*

--Laurie Colwin



BIRTH AND MANDATE

The enabling legislation for the Connectional Table (CT) as found in the *2004 United Methodist Book of Discipline* declares:

The purpose of the Connectional Table (CT) is for the discernment and articulation of the vision for the church and the stewardship of the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church as determined by the actions of the General Conference and in consultation with the Council of Bishops. As part of the total mission of the church, the CT is to serve as a steward of the vision and resources for mission and ministry, provide fiscal responsibility, and establish policies and procedures to carry out the mission of the church.¹

Born as an alternative to the “Living Into Our Future” report of the General Council on Ministries at the 2004 General Conference, the Connectional Table is challenged to function as both the visioning body of the church and the steward of resources employed to carry out the vision; to dream for the future of the denomination while managing the resources for ministry so lovingly provided by local churches worldwide.

¹ Paragraph 904, 2004 *Discipline*

A Transition Team, chaired by Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher, cared for personnel, property and programmatic issues associated with the dissolution of the General Council on Ministries, allowing the Connectional Table to move forward with its work. The report of the Transition Team can be found in the archives of the Connectional Table.

The 2004 General Conference made clear that “the Connectional Table is to be motivated by faithfulness to the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ; global in scope and holistic in understanding; inclusive in nature and collaborative in style; and while being efficient in the stewardship of resources, be transparent, accessible, and accountable in all relationships.”² Jurisdictional and central conferences are represented, the Council of Bishops both leads and collaborates, the agencies of the church are participants with voice (general secretaries) and vote (agency presidents) and where the ethnic caucuses of the denomination inform the work.

This Table is variously described by its members as:

- “...a group poised to prayerfully listen to God’s leading with expectation and hope; learn from each other through intense mutual respect; envision together a ‘what if and why not’ future; and enlist surprising coalitions that enrich and extend the ministries of The United Methodist Church.” -- Neil Alexander
- “...the only place where the whole UM world is around the same table.” -- Øyvind Helliesen
- “...committed to following the concepts of “Focus Your Vision” (Dewitt Jones) to ‘dream the dream, find that extraordinary vision, and keep it in focus.’” -- Mary Brooke Casad

As described by its first chair, Bishop Hopkins, the CT can be a model for the entire church:

When we discover our heritage and witness what God is doing around us, we can dream of what might be and design ministries to utilize God’s power and not our own. When we solve problems and try to “fix” the church, we experience a spiritual energy drain as we discover more problems that require us to make even more repairs. Soon we are relying on ourselves with heavy work to do rather than relying on God and finding fresh sources of hope and strength.³

FUNCTIONING

The hope of the church is in the quality of our conversations.
-- Bishop John Hopkins

² DCA, Vol. 4, No. 10, Friday, May 7, 2004, p. 2140

³ “Conversations and Discoveries,” Bishop John Hopkins, February 8, 2007

Under the able leadership of Bishop John Hopkins, the Connectional Table has used Christian conferencing as a primary working model. For John Wesley, Christian conferencing was one of the five-instituted *Means of Grace*, described by the following questions to consider:

- *Are you convinced how important and how difficult it is to “order your conversation right?”*
- *Is it “always in **grace**? seasoned with **salt**? [meant] to **minister grace** to the hearers?”*
- *Do not you converse too long at a time? Is not an hour commonly enough?*
- *Would it not be well always to have a determinate end in view; and to **pray** before and after it?*

An essential tenet is the belief that the Holy Spirit can lead and guide the church when all are in conversation. So it is an important value to have dialogue instead of debate, to find consensus around important matters rather than have “winners” and “losers.” The focus is on “ordering our conversation right.” This has required ample gathering time in **prayer**, in **covenant groups**, and in **worship**. Gathering around an altar table and celebrating together **Holy Communion** is an element of every CT meeting.

Leadership of the CT includes an Advisory Team with rotating membership coordinating the work between gatherings of the CT. Task groups attend to the work to be done to prepare for conversation at the semi-annual gatherings of the CT, as well as to attend to the *Disciplinary* functions assigned to it. Such organization has succeeded in distributing the work among the members of the CT and in moving forward the dialogue concerning vision and mission. Task groups include:

- Staff and Planning Advisory Team
- State of the Church
- Worldwide Nature of the Church (with COB)
- Evaluation and Review
- General Conference Report
- Joint Budget Process Committee (with GCFA)
- Personnel
- Listening Process Team (with GCFA)
- Finance Committee
- Internal Evaluation and Review
- Legislation
- World Service Contingency Funds

The size of the Connectional Table (47 voting members and 13 members with voice and no vote) has enabled the Connectional Table to keep everyone involved in leadership and in the various task groups. This has been and continues to be a working table.

Bishop Sharon Rader, Interim Executive Secretary; Cynthia Dopke, Office Administrator; and Elaine Amerson, part-time consultant for specific tasks; have staffed the CT for most of the quadrennium. In fall 2007, the CT hired Mary Brooke Casad as Executive Secretary to continue its work into the future.

A summary of meetings during the 2005-2008 quadrennium is included as an appendix to this report.

A LEARNING COMMUNITY

A hallmark of the CT is that all are **learners**. Becoming a learning community and endeavoring to understand the current reality of The United Methodist Church and the environs in which the church operates is the quest. Vital instructors of the CT included distinguished scholars Dr. Russell Ritchey, *The Marks of Methodism*; Dr. Lovett Weems, *Getting to Yes*; and Dr. Robert Harman, *Our Global Character*. Each spent significant time with the CT assisting it in understanding the context in which ministry is done and challenging the thinking of the CT on ‘how we have always done it.’

Reading and discussing a variety of books provided good groundwork:

- *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*
- *The Ice Cube is Melting: What is Really at Risk in United Methodism*
- *The World Parish? Hopes and Challenges of the United Methodist Church in a Global Setting*
- *Confronting Reality: Doing What Matters to Get Things Right*

In addition to the intellectual pursuits, the CT has learned from its members and their connections. Of particular importance were the voices from central conferences. In addition to learning of the different cultural contexts for ministry, the CT learned of the challenges to ministry in other parts of the world.

The CT recognizes that it did not sufficiently form the necessary relationships with annual conferences. Improving these relationships will be a focus of the next quadrennium.

The learning community led the CT into the following initiatives.

INITIATIVES

The CT has sought to identify key initiatives that will enhance the ability of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The synergy created by having broad representation of the church at one table led the work summarized below.

1. Seven Vision Pathways/Four Areas of Collaboration

The Council of Bishops introduced the **Seven Vision Pathways**⁴, which were derived from the annual conferences within their purview. The general agencies worked together to formulate **Four Areas of Collaboration** to implement the Seven Vision Pathways, helping to nurture and strengthen the

⁴ These are: (1) Teach the Wesleyan model of reaching and forming disciples of Jesus Christ; (2) Strengthen clergy and lay leadership; (3) Develop new congregations; (4) Transform existing congregations; (5) Expand racial/ethnic ministries; (6) Reach and transform the lives of new generations of children; (7) Eliminate poverty in community with the poor.

leadership of the Council of Bishops in relationship to the needs of the annual conferences. The four areas are:

- Leadership
- Congregational development
- Elimination of poverty
- Global health

Though the four foci are new, the general agencies, with the support of the CT, have begun to move forward in the following ways:

Nothing but Nets!, a collaboration of the United Methodist Church, the National Basketball Association Foundation, *Sports Illustrated*, The Mark J. Gordon Foundation, and the United Nations Foundation, brought energy to the CT, showing the potential for here-to-fore unmatched partnership to save the lives of countless children on the continent of Africa. The CT endorsed this effort, led by United Methodist Communications, paving the way for the campaign to reach conferences and local churches throughout the connection.

Path One, a collaborative effort of the Council of Bishops, Network of Church Developers, the General Board of Discipleship and annual conferences set a substantial goal for starting new churches in the United States. Recognizing the synergy and emergent need to reach beyond the doors of our local churches, the World Service Contingency Fund provided support for the hire of staff at GBOD to begin this work in the 2005-2008 quadrennium.

This common work is illustrated in the **Calls to Action**⁵: ways to move forward on the vision with focused action that the people of The United Methodist Church are called to do corporately and individually as disciples of Jesus Christ.

2. State of the Church Report

Bishop Hopkins planted the seed of a “State of the Church” report at the first meeting. In subsequent meetings, the CT affirmed that it needed to hear comprehensively from clergy and laity across the worldwide church; thus the idea of an ongoing conversation was born. The Martec Group was commissioned by the Connectional Table to conduct a major research project.

Short essays were submitted by a cross-section of church leaders as contributions to the State of the Church Report. They came from pastors and laity, educational leaders and bishops, leaders of general

⁵ The Calls to Action are: (1) Live the United Methodist Way, (2) Start New Churches, (3) Reach and care for the children, and (4) Stamp out killer diseases of poverty: HIV/AIDS and malaria (Global Health)

agencies and caucuses, young adults and older adults, United Methodists from Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and the United States.

The State of the Church Report provides a detailed snapshot in time of The United Methodist Church today. It encompasses the issues and concerns on the minds of the church's members and their hopes for the denomination in the future. The report:

- Encourages conversation and visioning across the church;
- Identifies signs of strength and weakness in the life and ministries of the church; and
- Recognizes the church's heritage and work.

The research aimed to capture the thoughts, values and judgments of a cross-section of people who participate in The United Methodist Church's mission and ministry. The State of the Church report was published in the September 2007 issue of *The Interpreter* and can be found at www.umc.org/stateofthechurch. Study guides were included to encourage further conversation in local church settings.

3. Worldwide Nature of the Church

Confronting Killings in the Philippines

Upon hearing of the systematic killings of clergy and church workers in the Philippines, the CT joined with the General Board of Global Ministries, the General Board of Church and Society and United Methodist Communications in a fact-finding delegation to Manila where it met with families of the assassinated and those potentially listed for assassination as a result of their Christian commitment to justice. This was a humbling and infuriating experience: humbling because it illustrated the importance of the church in the struggle for justice among the poor; infuriating because the lives lost in this struggle appear to have been taken through state-sanctioned killings. While raising awareness, this delegation could not exert enough political pressure on the Arroyo government necessary to stop the bloodshed. Yet, the delegation provided hope to those in the struggle who understand their story will move among United Methodist Christians on five continents.

Invitation to Varna, Bulgaria

At the invitation of CT members from the three European central conferences, the CT held a meeting in Varna, Bulgaria. The meeting focused on the challenges confronting the UMC in Europe such as new church development, theological education, cultural and economic changes, migration and interfaith relations. Considerable time was spent discussing what it means to be a worldwide UMC, and a task group was established to work with the Council of Bishops on this matter.

It was a great learning experience for the CT to meet in a central conference, and it was an inspiration to meet the leaders and the people of the UMC in Bulgaria. There the church has been growing and expanding since the fall of the communist regime. On Sunday CT members worshipped together with

some of the local congregations. At the end of the meeting the CT forwarded \$25,000 to the UMC in Bulgaria to be used for strategic needs and church development.

Movement from US-Centric to Worldwide Church

The Council of Bishops and CT collaboratively initiated a task group to study the nature of our United Methodist relationships throughout the world and determine how we might live more justly into the reality of a worldwide church.

Grounded in John Wesley's statement, "I look upon the world as my parish," the joint task group found that General Conferences have struggled for forty years with the relationship between the church in the United States and the church in other parts of the world. Some in autonomous and autonomous affiliated churches, along with central conference representatives on the Connectional Table, spoke of brokenness or dysfunction resulting from a concentration of power in the US church. The urgency around this issue increases as members of the United Methodist family outside of the US contemplate separation. The time spent at General Conference and elsewhere on US issues might better be used to think creatively about our common mission in the world.

The CT and Council of Bishops are presenting to the 2008 General Conference a series of twenty-three constitutional changes that do two things:

- changes the nomenclature from "central," a term that has roots in a colonial past, to "regional," and,
- allows a future General Conference to establish a "regional" conference in the United States.

The legislation does not establish a US regional conference now. Rather, the legislation, if passed by the 2008 General Conference and in the requisite number of annual and central conferences, would allow study between 2008 and 2012, with the possibility of establishing a US regional conference in 2012. The proposed legislation does not do any of the following:

- It does not change the number, purpose or function of jurisdictional conferences.
- It does not change the way bishops are elected or assigned.
- It does not change the purpose, number or scope of any general agency.
- It does not change the size or power of General Conference.
- It does not change the way the Social Principles are decided upon or amended.
- It does not change the way money is apportioned or allocated.

The resolution for study specifies the principles that should guide this study.

It is the intention of the legislation to foster widespread conversation about the worldwide nature of the UMC and to seek a structure that better represents parity and justice between and among members worldwide. Research and legislation is available at www.worldwideumc.org.

4. Evaluation and Review

Paragraph 905.4 charges the Connectional Table with the responsibility to review and evaluate the missional effectiveness of general program-related agencies and commissions as they seek to aid annual conferences and local churches in fulfilling the mission of The United Methodist Church. The Evaluation and Review Task Group of the CT was appointed in December 2005.

The CT evaluation plan consisted of a three-phase process:

- *Internal* evaluation conducted by each agency/commission;
- *Independent* evaluation and review of the agency's internal evaluation report using guidelines provided by the CT, to provide feedback to the agency and then submit a report to the CT Evaluation and Review Task Group;
- CT Task Group review the reports and provide feedback to the agencies/commissions. An executive summary of this feedback was presented to the CT and General Council on Finance and Administration.

Based upon learnings from this process and consultation with the general secretaries, the Evaluation and Review Task Group next steps will include:

- An earlier start to the process;
- Orientation about evaluation for the CT and agencies/commissions;
- Mid-point assessment;
- An opportunity for revision prior to the submission of the final report;
- A timetable that facilitates greater use of the results of the evaluation process in the budget-building process.

Such a process should ensure continuous improvement in the missional effectiveness of the agencies/commissions.

5. Budget Development

One of the mandates of the CT is to bring money and ministry to the same table. The Connectional Table joined the General Council on Finance and Administration to discuss, discern and reach an agreement for the 2009-2012 budgeted apportionments. Members of the two groups worked together to hear budget reports, proposals and recommendations. The agencies had developed their budgets to reflect the priorities of the four areas of collaboration and reduce duplication of services. After much deliberation the CT/GCFA approved a \$641,897,000 budget to be recommended to the 2008 General Conference.

In staying focused on the four priorities, hard decisions were made by each agency to eliminate or reduce programs and initiatives. The learnings from this first joint effort will be carried forward into the next quadrennium as the CT and GCFA seek to be faithful to their missional mandates.

6. World Service Contingency Funds

Separate from the budgeting process was the administration of the World Service Contingency Fund. This fund is established by General Conference to resource unfunded mandates from the prior General Conference or to fund emerging needs within the mandates of general agency work.

The process adopted by the Connectional Table for allocating the World Service Contingency Fund ensured participation of all general agencies in prioritizing use of the funds, and prompted collaboration among general agencies in funded ministries. Upon identification of a need, the general secretaries of the general agencies met to consider, refine, identify synergies and then recommend funding to the Connectional Table. A task group of the CT reviewed each request and recommendation and made decisions, acting on behalf of the CT between meetings, involving the full Connectional Table in consideration when possible.

During 2005-2008 quadrennium, the following projects were funded:

GBHEM - Study of Ministry: Study and bring clarity regarding the ordering of ministry in the UMC	\$36,153
GBGM - Latin America/Caribbean Consultation: Consultation on relationship between the UMC and Autonomous Methodist Churches in Latin American and the Caribbean	\$98,700
GBGM: Global AIDS Committee – Support for unfunded mandate of the 2004 General Conference to raise funds to combat AIDS in parts of the world most devastated by this disease	\$205,000
GCUMM – The Study of Men in the UMC: Evaluate the participation of men in the UMC and make recommendations for the future	\$35,961
GCCUIC - Global Nature of Church Consultation: Research into the relationships among annual and central conferences, and autonomous and autonomous affiliated churches	\$25,000
GBCS - Social Creed 2008 GC Consultations: Consultation with central conferences on a revised Social Creed to be presented to the 2008 General Conference	\$27,000
GBOD - New Church Start Initiative: Fund two staff positions and start-up costs to support the New Congregational Development effort, working with the Path One Team, between 2006 and the beginning of the next quadrennium	\$492,500
GCCUIC - Understanding White Privilege: Development of educational materials on the issue of White Privilege	\$7,000
Total	\$927,314

For information on these projects, please consult the report of the general agencies.

It is anticipated that approximately \$120,902 will remain unused in the 2005-08 quadrennium.

7. *Internal Evaluation and Review*

As a learning community, the CT made a commitment to evaluate itself throughout the quadrennium so that it might grow to an optimum level of functioning. The Internal Evaluation and Review task group will make its report to the final meeting of the CT in March 2008, just prior to General Conference.

AN INVITATION TO CONTINUING CONVERSATION

The Connectional Table, a “**table and not an agency,**” is well described by its Chair, Bishop John Hopkins:

The Council of Bishops, General Council on Finance and Administration, annual conferences, general agencies, caucuses, youth, and young adults are always “at the table.” The Connectional Table is a place to gather the right groups at the right time around the right issues for conversation and momentum. As much as possible, The Connectional Table avoids the role of coordinating, regulating, and operating in order to appreciate God’s work among us as a church and focus on the future. The Connectional Table is a place to bring conversations from the parking lots and hallways into the living room of the church and enlarge participation in the discussion.”

The Connectional Table looks forward to extending the dialogue into annual conferences and beyond such that we dream together for the good future of our great denomination, committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

APPENDIX

THE GATHERINGS OF THE CONNECTIONAL TABLE:



(1) The initial, organizing meeting was in San Diego January 20-23, 2005. The CT came together from diverse backgrounds and became acquainted by living and working together—representing many annual conferences as laypersons and clergy, central conferences, jurisdictions, general agencies, caucuses, and representatives of the Council of Bishops. The video “Focus Your Vision” by DeWitt Jones was inspiring—a call to find and focus attention

on the main thing and be willing to let the rest go.



(2) The second meeting was in Chicago May 17-19, 2005 with conversation about the new thing God is doing. The call was to “discover and dream” what the UMC could be.

(3) Lake Junaluska was the site of the meeting November 4-5, 2005 with an exploration of ways to say “Yes” to the exciting future of the UMC: What can God do if all are working together instead of protecting “turf”?



(4) The April 27-May 1, 2006 meeting in Varna, Bulgaria was an opportunity to continue exploring in more depth the global nature of the church and its significance.

(5) The fall meeting in Fort Worth October 22-24, 2006 entailed receiving reports from the various task groups and updates from committees, agencies, and teams and CT members engaged in preparations for the 2008 General

Conference.

(6) Simpsonwood, Georgia provided the setting for the May 21-24, 2007 meeting, a joint gathering with the GCFA to determine the recommended 2009-2012 denominational budget. In addition, highlights of the CT meeting included:

- Hearing an update on the State of the Church Report and decision to produce and disseminate the final report.
- Receiving the report “Worldwide Ministry Through the United Methodist Church: an Interim Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church.”



- Receiving the presentation of the Evaluation and Review Task Group which reviews/evaluates the general program related agencies and connectional structures of the church.
- Information provided from Path One related to recasting a vision for Evangelism in the United States: intentionally creating an authentic Christian movement that renews our faith and leads us to passionately sharing the Good News.