

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

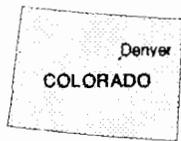
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## A crucial time for the UMC

Usually in *Connections* I deliberately stick with topics that apply to many churches, not just to those in my own denomination. In this issue, however, as in one or two others within the past year, I am addressing some subjects that pertain specifically to the United Methodist Church, because this month the UMC will make decisions that are likely to be crucial for its future.



The UMC's worldwide governing body, General Conference, which meets only once every 4 years, will meet April 16-26 in Denver. Because this opportunity comes so infrequently,

because most of the 998 General Conference delegates get *Connections*, and because I believe our decisions will be so important for the UMC, in this issue of *Connections* I'm writing about some proposals that will come before General Conference.

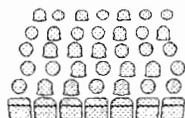
### We're not alone

I doubt that this issue will be a total loss for readers in other denominations, however, because many of them face the same problems as the UMC. I'm writing this month about cumbersome bureaucracy that hinders church members' God-given ministries instead of helping. I'm writing about the abuse of power, and about unwillingness to change. I'm writing about failure to put our main emphasis on making disciples, which must be done mainly by local congregations and lay Christians. These problems aren't limited to the UMC.



### Please pray for us

Whether or not you are United Methodist, please pray for all of us who are General Conference delegates. UMC members have widely different views on some of the issues that we will be voting on. Please pray that we will hear God's voice and vote in accordance with it. Pray that we will help our church discontinue programs, methods, and policies that are ineffective or that do not reflect God's will. And pray that we will adopt whatever new ones God may want us to begin. I'll appreciate your prayers, and so will other delegates.



## Christians in ministry—the church helps and hinders

One of the greatest assets of the United Methodist Church is its organizational structure—its connec-tional system. However, parts of that structure have become too elaborate and inflexible to let the UMC be as effective as it needs to be.



In the church, as in any other large institution, adding more and more rules and more levels of bureaucracy is dangerously easy, and they eventually keep the church from doing some of what it needs to do. That has happened in the UMC.

### UMC structure—an asset and a liability

UMC structure is based on a series of organizational levels. In the U.S., local congregations are grouped into districts, with each supervised by a District Superintendent. Above the districts are regions called Annual Conferences, with a bishop supervising each one. Above them are Jurisdictions, of which there are 5 in the U.S. The top level is called the general church. Prescribed officers, boards, and committees are elected and appointed at each level.



Some of this structure has become a hindrance to ministry. It wastes time and money that we need to use more efficiently for helping the world become more like God wants it to be. Even when we can see that what we're doing is no longer working as well as it needs to, however, changing is scary and hard. And people who are comfortable and secure in the current system will oppose any change.

### It's time for change

In spite of these obstacles, we need to make some changes in the United Methodist Church. They're long overdue. ❖

## Effectiveness requires trust

UMC decisions are made through a system of representative democracy. Each congregation elects members to its own governing council or board, and also elects members to represent the congregation at the annual meeting of its regional Annual Conference. Each Annual Conference elects delegates to the Jurisdictional and General Conferences, which meet every 4 years. Delegates to Annual, Jurisdictional, and General Conferences are half clergy and half lay; however, many lay delegates are church employees, especially at General Conference.



## Members who feel unheard

Despite being represented in this way, many UMC members feel voiceless. General-church agencies often make public pronouncements that go against many members' beliefs. Also, many of every congregation's expenses are prescribed from above.



General Conference sets a budget for general-church programs and administration. Annual Conferences and districts add their program and administrative costs, and the total is apportioned to all congregations. But some congregations, when they consider apportioned expenses undesirable or unnecessary, refuse to pay part of their apportionments. Their distrust and rebellion hurt the UMC's effectiveness, but they don't see any other way to be heard.

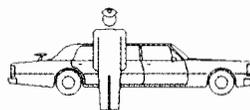
## Waste, extravagance, and arrogance

UMC members too often see general church agencies arrogantly refusing to consider their views. They see waste and extravagance, too.



Responding to pleas from UMs, the 1992 General Conference appointed a task force to investigate the possibility of moving the offices of one UMC general board from New York City to a location with lower operating costs and a lifestyle more typical of the overall UMC membership. The task force visited several possible sites, at great cost to the church, and recommended only

one. It is in a suburb of Washington, D.C., which is no different from New York City in terms of what UMC members wanted changed. The recommendation seemed clearly designed to prevent change. It didn't look at all like a good-faith effort.



The General Secretary of a UMC board (its top employee) arrived at a recent regional meeting in the heartland of the U.S. in a limousine. This kind of luxury isn't what Jesus modeled or advocated, so it's not surprising that UMC members don't want to provide it for church employees.

The 4-year term of service of a U.S. member of a general board or agency costs the UMC about \$5,500 in travel, lodging, and other meeting expenses. For members from outside the U.S., it's \$16,000. And the size of these agencies ranges from about 50 to nearly 200 members.

Voluminous mailings from UMC general boards and agencies swamp delegates in the months just before General Conference. These mailings represent a substantial cost, yet few delegates will read all this material. Besides, much of it duplicates what is in the official 1100-page book of reports and proposals that each delegate is expected to read.



One extravagant promotional piece that each delegate recently received from a UMC board features a heavy folder with an embossed logo and silver print. Stapled inside is a 4-page, full-color document. In a pocket are 6 full-color, tabbed, 4-page, slick-paper inserts with large photographs. The cost of printing and mailing this one item was probably greater than some congregations' yearly budgets, and apportionments evidently paid for it.

The Jurisdictional Conferences that meet every 4 years, a few months after General Conference, involve twice as many delegates as General Conference. Just as for General Conference, much of the cost of delegates' travel, lodging, and other expense is paid by the UMC. These conferences last for 4 days, yet their only real function is to elect bishops. This use of time and money is unwise. We need to make some changes.



## An opportunity for improvement

A group of UMC clergy and laity from all over the U.S. is submitting to General Conference some proposals that I support, called the Aldersgate Covenant. If adopted these proposals would reduce the number and size of UMC boards and agencies without eliminating any essential areas of ministry or endangering inclusiveness and diversity. The Aldersgate proposals would also give Annual Conferences and local congregations more choice in what their apportionments support. The

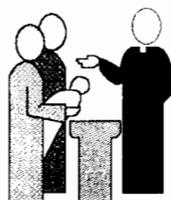


proposals would give choice, too, in how congregations and Conferences structure themselves to accomplish their ministries. The Aldersgate proposals focus on the church's God-given purpose—making disciples.

Proposals to General Conference from other groups would make similar changes if adopted. I believe that adopting some of them is essential. Some UMC members (especially those who depend on the present UMC structure for their status or income) say we should wait and study the problem before making changes, but I believe we've already waited too long. Our membership has shrunk from over 13 million a few years ago to less than 9 million now, yet our bureaucracy has grown. And our next chance for change won't come until the year 2000. That may be too late. ❖

## A mixed bag of proposals

Some proposals that will come before General Conference aren't likely to have much effect one way or the other, yet we'll spend a lot of time on them. One is the report of a study of baptism. Others come from a ministry study that has been going on for



years. It proposes changes in the structure of the UMC's ordained ministry. Few lay members know what the current structure of our ordained ministry is, however, and even fewer are aware of the proposed changes, so this proposal is mainly an insiders' issue.

## Lay ministry—helping it or hurting it?

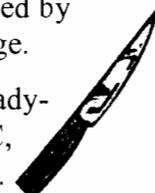
Some proposals, I'm afraid, would actually make our situation worse. One of them, in the Ministry Study report, proposes a new office called Lay Ministry Steward. (I'm abbreviating it LMS.) A congregation could choose to elect no LMS, or it could elect several. The office is meant to give "innovative, disciplined, responsive support of the ministry of all Christians in and through the local congregation." That sounds good, but I hope General Conference will reject it. Here's why.



- Being elected to this office would give lay members no ministry opportunities that are not already available.

- This office would give the false message that lay Christians should do ministry only through institutional-church channels. The fact that an LMS can be elected only if recommended by the pastor adds to this damaging message.

- This new office would add to the already-huge bureaucratic structure of the UMC, when it needs to be pared down instead.



- This office could easily become a mere honorary title and thus meaningless. It is likely to be given to powerful members strictly for political purposes, discouraging less powerful members who do valuable ministries. And although an LMS can be elected for only one year at a time, failing to re-elect a prominent lay person once he or she had been elected would be very unlikely.

- Each LMS would be required to take a UMC-provided training course initially and another one annually. If an LMS already had received adequate training in other ways and was continuing it, the required course would be mere busy-work that needlessly took time away from ministry.

- The proposal requires pastors to meet regularly with each LMS, which would add to the pastor's work load. Yet it could be time wasted for both if their aims or styles weren't compatible.



**2 x 0 = 0**

Every UMC congregation already has a required office called Lay Leader, which has no

specified duties. Creative, initiative-taking people use the office to do worthwhile things, but too often it's just a name on a list. When one lay friend of mine heard about the proposed LMS, he said, "We don't need another zero. We already have one—the Lay Leader office—and two times zero is still zero!" Too often his observation is right. The LMS



wouldn't be ex-officio on all congregational boards and committees as the Lay Leader is, but that difference doesn't justify adding another title with no specified duties. ❖

### Let's choose life

I believe the time for the UMC to make needed changes is now or never. I hope we will do it now. I hope we will choose life for our denomination.

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ... Deuteronomy 30:19

*Barbara*

**Next month . . . Our traditions aren't God**



**Connections** 4-96

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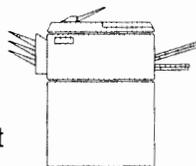
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## Christians in ministry— the church helps and hinders



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