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# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 31 - MAY 1995



BY BARBARA WENDLAND

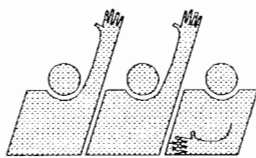
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## Who will speak for the church?

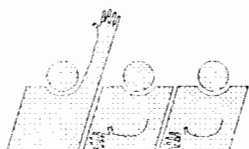
When we're active in a local church congregation, we want a voice in its decisions. We want a say in how money is spent, what kind of worship services we have, how buildings and other property are used, who is appointed as pastor, and whether our church participates in the community food pantry.



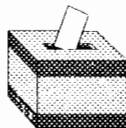
In our local church we usually know how to get our views on such issues considered. We can sometimes hold offices that give us a vote, and because we know pastors, staff members, and other lay members, we can simply tell them how we feel.

## We speak through elected delegates

For most of us it's a different story when we want a voice in decisions that come from our whole denomination, about church structure, policies, and doctrine. We may object to having to pay for certain administrative costs or mission projects, or we may disagree with church leaders' actions, but we often feel we can't do much about it.



In such matters we must speak mainly through delegates that we elect to denominational decision-making bodies. Although a very few delegates must represent very large and diverse groups of us, we need to take an active part in choosing those delegates.

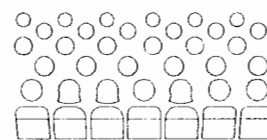


## For now, we must use the existing system

Unfortunately, few of us do that. This may show the need for changes in our delegate-electing process, but until such changes happen we need to use the present system as effectively as possible. In the United Methodist Church right now, that means electing our most capable, perceptive, and Spirit-led members as General Conference delegates. ❖

## A crucial time for United Methodists

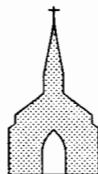
I'm a United Methodist but many *Connections* readers aren't, so in *Connections* I usually avoid issues that concern only the United Methodist Church. I'm making an exception this month, however, because at the UMC's 68 regional Annual Conference sessions in the U.S. during the coming month, members will elect delegates to the UMC's April 1996 General Conference, and that's an especially important event for the UMC. If you're not United Methodist you may want to tune out now and tune back in next month. In future *Connections* I will address some of the issues that General Conference will consider, but they are issues that other denominations are also facing.



General Conference meets only once every four years and lasts nearly two weeks. It is the only body authorized to speak and act for the entire United

Methodist Church. Its 996 delegates come from all over the world and are divided equally between laity and clergy. The lay delegates are elected by the laity, and the clergy delegates by the clergy. Being a delegate is considered prestigious, so the election process is fiercely competitive and political.

General Conference acts by voting on proposals called "petitions." Many of them are submitted by national and regional church bodies, but any UMC member or group can submit one, and several thousand are usually submitted. By this process General Conference makes changes in the Book of Discipline, which contains the UMC's doctrinal statements and governing rules. General Conference also adopts statements to be added to the Book of Resolutions, representing the UMC's official position on various social and political issues. UM leaders can use the contents of these two books as the basis for speaking and acting on behalf of the entire UMC.



Decisions that the 1996 General Conference makes could eventually make the difference between life and death for the United Methodist Church. Who we send as delegates is therefore very important.

## Choosing effective people

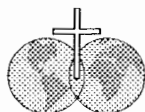
What qualifications do our General Conference delegates need?



- **Faith, knowledge, and discernment.**

Above all, delegates need to be clear on what the overall message of the Bible is and what the true purpose of the church is. They need to see God's will for today's church and today's world, and to recognize God's voice even when it speaks through people who oppose our familiar, comfortable ways of being the church. Our delegates need to have strong faith and to let that faith guide their votes.

- **Ability to see the big picture.**



Delegates need to be familiar with the denomination's overall structure and program. They also need to be aware of the variety of Christian viewpoints that exist within the church, and to respect them all and be open to new insights. After all, no one person or group knows all there is to know about God. No one's personal views and experience reflect God's will for every Christian. Neither narrow-minded nor single-issue delegates are as effective as those who see the larger picture.

- **Ability to be effective in a large group that includes many experienced, well informed, well prepared, politically skilled people.**

Some delegates exert influence by speaking convincingly to the entire assembly or a legislative committee. Others do it by negotiating behind the scenes. For each method, being known beyond one's own Annual Conference is very valuable.



- **Time, ability, and willingness to read and digest large quantities of written material.**

Before General Conference, each delegate receives a giant book containing the petitions that have been submitted. And during General Conference, crucial items often come to the floor without advance notice. Being prepared is important at all these times.



- **Stamina.**

General Conference meets from early morning til late at night for nearly two weeks, and every delegate needs to be present full-time. It's a grueling, physically demanding job. ❖

## Tactics to guard against

In a recent article in a magazine published by a group of United Methodists who are well-organized and well-funded but narrow in their view of the church's calling, a layman told how he got elected as a delegate to a previous General Conference. The article was clearly meant to help others with similar views to get elected this year.

I found his method shocking. He distributed letters, posters, and hand-outs stating only his position on two issues that panic some church members but that Jesus apparently never mentioned. This man



**You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!**

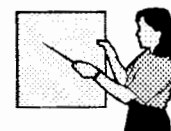
— Matthew 23:24

showed no interest in love, justice, the church's mission, or any others of the issues that represent the main message of the Gospels and most of the rest of the Bible.

We need to be alert for this kind of tactics and to oppose them. We can't afford to let fear and prejudice control the church. We can't afford to elect narrow, blind guides to lead our churches. We need God-inspired leaders instead.

## Understanding the process

Becoming informed about the voting process before going to Annual Conference this year is very important, especially for members who have never previously participated in the election of General Conference delegates.



### Two elections in one

In the same election, delegates are elected for General Conference and for one of the five U. S. Jurisdictional Conferences that will meet in July 1996 to elect new bishops to replace retiring ones.

All General Conference delegates are also delegates to their Jurisdictional Conference, but an equal number of additional delegates are also elected for Jurisdictional Conference. After the General Conference delegates are elected, the additional Jurisdictional delegates are elected, and the first ones elected serve as alternates for General



Conference. It's confusing! And adding to the confusion, the voting process is different from the process used in most other organizations.

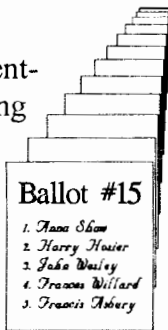
▪ **No official nominations**

Many Annual Conferences compile a list of members who are interested in serving as lay delegates to General Conference. However, any lay person who is a member of a UMC congregation within that Annual Conference, who has been a member of the UMC for at least the past two years, and who has been an active participant in the UMC for at least the past four years is eligible to be a General Conference lay delegate. Any clergy member who meets similar requirements is eligible to be a clergy delegate.



▪ **Many ballots**

Election requires getting a certain percentage of the total votes cast, not just getting more than anyone else. This means that many ballots are taken before enough people get enough votes. It also means that who you avoid voting for can be as important as who you vote for.



▪ **An order that matters**

At General and Jurisdictional Conferences, each Annual Conference's delegates sit together in individually assigned seats. They sit in the order in which they were elected. The first person elected (lay or clergy in alternate years) is the official leader of the delegation. The first clergy person elected may be considered a candidate for bishop. Members get to choose which General Conference legislative committee they want to be on, in order of their election. So the order is important. ❖

**Finding the best mix**



Voters need to consider the overall makeup of their Annual Conference's delegation in addition to the qualifications of its individual members. The entire geographical area of the Annual Conference needs to be represented, as do views from small towns and large cities, small churches and large ones. The delegation needs some people who have been General Conference delegates before and some who have not. And it needs to reflect the church's membership with regard to age, sex, and race.



**Lay members paid by the church**

In choosing lay delegates, another important factor is knowing who depends on the church for income, job security, or personal status and identity. We often elect clergy spouses, diaconal ministers, and other church employees as lay delegates, but because of their position or their spouse's they may not be free to vote for change or even to say what they really think. They are usually well informed and strongly committed, but they have a large investment in preserving the parts of the present church system that support them, and they are only a tiny proportion of our lay members.



Clergy spouses and church employees deserve to be represented, of course, but if we put them in many of our lay delegate positions we defeat the purpose of having an equal number of clergy and lay delegates. ❖

**Getting the facts**

Some UMC Annual Conferences have already had conference-wide gatherings to discuss General Conference issues. Some distribute biographical information about potential lay delegates. Some distribute their answers to questions like "What do you see as the most important issue facing the UMC?"

Some conferences, however, prohibit distribution of even the most basic information about potential lay delegates. Some conferences report UMC involvement but not daily occupations or

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, neither a church employee nor a clergy wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* goes to more than 8000 readers in 48 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.

non-church volunteer service, which keeps lay voters in the dark about important aspects of potential delegates' beliefs and capabilities. And lay voters often have to search to find out who has been a General Conference delegate, who is a church employee or clergy spouse, and which potential lay delegates are from the same church or the same district.

Clergy don't have this problem in choosing their delegates, because most of them know each other. They are a smaller group, all of them are lifelong Annual Conference members, and they see each other often in the course of their work.

### Pray, get informed, speak

Selecting our best people to speak for the church can be hard, but it's vitally important.

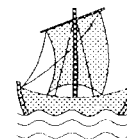
We must inform ourselves, seek God's guidance, and make our voices heard. We are the church. ❖



*Barbara*

Next month . . .

**Boat-rockers in the church—troublemakers or prophets?**



### Connections 5-95

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## Who will speak for the church?

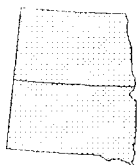
United Methodists—this issue could be helpful to the Lay Members of your Annual Conference

You're welcome to make copies to give them



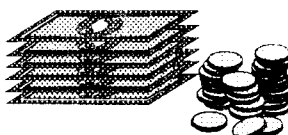
### An apology and a welcome

In welcoming members of the UMC's Troy Annual Conference last month, I failed to realize that this conference includes the whole state of Vermont in addition to part of New York. My apologies, Vermont United Methodists, and a belated welcome!



This month 630 lay and clergy members of the UMC's Dakotas Annual Conference begin getting *Connections* in their conference's resource packet. Welcome to them and to all other new *Connections* readers!

### A reader wonders— Does the offering have to be blah?



In response to my calling the offering a blah part of worship, in last month's *Connections*, a reader writes, "It is, in most of our worship in the U.S.A., but it doesn't have to be."

"Friends who have attended worship services in Africa and Haiti," he continues, "tell me about offerings that take 20 minutes because of the joyous singing and dancing that are part and parcel of the act of giving. And in Deuteronomy 14 the offerings are an occasion for a big party." This reader wonders if we could find ways to bring that kind of spontaneity and joy into that part of our worship.

What do you think?

