

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Hearing all the voices

Until recent years the question of who should do the decision-making in mainline U.S. Protestant churches wasn't even asked. It wasn't asked in secular governments or in business, either. Most deciders were white men, and in many churches' early years those men were all clergy.



Many years ago churches started including lay delegates in their top decision-making bodies. Later, the church and secular institutions started requiring the inclusion of women and people of many racial backgrounds—a change that was long overdue.

Asking all the questions

United Methodist boards and staffs must now include laity and clergy, men and women, people of all ages, physically handicapped people, and many racial minorities. These policies try to keep minorities from being overpowered. They try to assure that previously excluded groups will be included. They let the church hear from people it isn't reaching but needs to reach.



Policies aimed at these worthy goals, however, don't guarantee that board members will have needed skills, experience, or interest. These policies don't give regions with the most members the most votes. Does that matter? Can we get needed skills in other ways? Can we listen to the majority without missing voices God wants us to hear? If every board doesn't include every kind of member or group, will we miss views we need to hear?



Local congregations and regional bodies in all denominations need to ask these questions when they elect boards and committees. Delegates to this year's UMC General and Jurisdictional Conferences need to ask these questions about reorganization

Our customs or God's will?

"If this church changes its policy on homosexuality, our people will leave!" an African delegate said heatedly during the 1996 United Methodist General Conference. Although other UMC members also oppose such a change, the African delegate's outrage seemed to relate more to his country's culture than to the issue's substance. However, some UMC members say the UMC shouldn't adopt any policy that so strongly contradicts the cultural standards of a country where UMC churches are.



I heard a similar argument years ago when U.S. courts said men's service clubs had to start including women. "Rotary is in countries all over the world," some Rotarians said, "and in some of those, religious beliefs forbid men to associate with women in public. If Rotary let women join, those countries' clubs would drop out and Rotary would suffer, so we mustn't change." But Rotary changed, and it's still growing worldwide.



Looking through the wrong lens

I'm afraid people who give reasons like these for not changing are basing their views mainly on what's customary in their culture. And of course we in the U.S. do that. We're used to having cheap gasoline, big cars, and elaborate highways, so we don't even consider whether that practice may be greedy, wasteful, and therefore sinful.

I'm afraid that like the African delegate and the Rotarians who didn't want change, we look at certain issues mainly through the lens of our culture. We need to use the lens of the Bible instead.



What should a global church do?

What should members of a worldwide church like the UMC do, when they strongly believe God opposes a practice that some cultures take for granted? Should Christians avoid advocating a policy that they believe justice requires, merely because certain cultures consider the policy unacceptable? To find and obey God's will, we must consider these questions.

proposals. They also need to ask them when they choose members of general-church boards. Here are some of the ways in which the questions show up.

■ **Money, numbers, and insiders' approval**

UMC members in the southeastern U.S. want a bigger voice because they're more numerous and they furnish more funds than any other part of the UMC. For a similar reason, many U.S. members want more representation than other parts of the world, in UMC conferences.



Where is God's will in issues like these? On the surface, giving the biggest voice to the groups that furnish the most funds and have the most members seems only fair. Nobody wants to give to an organization whose actions and policies they believe are wrong, so givers expect a voice in policy decisions.

Members who can't give much money also need a voice, however, and we too often fail to let them have it, not only at the global level but also in the local church. We elect big givers as officers and board members. We elect only members who are known and approved by the people in power. I recently heard a Presbyterian say, "I've been an active member for years and I give regularly, but I know I'll never get to be on the Session, because I'm not rich like so



many of our members. And when I expressed my views to our senior pastor recently, about an issue that related to my profession, he didn't even listen."

While ignoring small-but-regular givers, we may let non-givers have a voice merely because they're affluent or powerful. This is happening in a congregation that includes thirty doctors' families who give nothing. Several of them complain often about what the church isn't providing that they consider necessary, and they're listened to and never confronted.

■ **Diversity requirements**

When UMC delegates consider current proposals for eliminating or reorganizing general agencies, they will need to remember unintended results that can come from well-meant efforts to insure diversity. Above the local-church level, most UMC boards must have members from many minority demographic groups, yet the total number of board mem-

bers is limited. As a result, a minority group can have proportionally more representation in boards and staffs than in the church as a whole. The tyranny of the majority, which we were trying to avoid, is replaced by an equally dangerous tyranny of minorities.



Because ethnic minorities and women have so often been denied church leadership roles, these groups often join forces now to support each other's candidates for office. That means their candidates may be elected even if others are more qualified. UMC delegates will need to be aware of this danger when they vote for bishop candidates this year.



Discrimination has often left ethnic-minority church members without the income that other members have.

Minorities haven't been attracted to churches that heavily reflect Anglo culture. In efforts to remedy these problems, funding priority is often given to programs aimed at helping ethnic-minority churches. UMC delegates need to ask when this priority is appropriate and when it isn't.

Using diversity as a basis for choosing board members can have various unhelpful effects. Some geographic areas end up with several representatives on a board while others have none. A few minority members are on many boards while equally capable members of larger demographic groups never get to be on any. Out of frustration, members of the larger groups sometimes use diversity requirements in ways that defeat those requirements' purpose.



I've seen this happen during preparation of forms that each UMC conference must submit, saying who could fill diversity requirements on general-church boards. "Is anyone in our conference a Pacific Islander?", we ask. "What about a Native American?" Then, "We need someone with a



handicap." "What about Joe? He's hard of hearing." "Sure, put his name down." Yet Joe's slight hearing loss isn't the kind of handicap that often excludes people.

■ **Official titles for lay members**

Some proposed changes in the roles of UMC Lay Speakers and lay pastors seem likely to have a harm-

ful effect if General Conference adopts them. They're evidently aimed at making lay members more aware that they are all called to ministry and are appreciated when they answer the call. But adding more church titles and certification processes for laity would have the opposite effect. It wouldn't encourage lay members to communicate the gospel and promote love and justice out in the world,



the ministry to which God calls most lay Christians. Instead, proposed changes would make them look more like clergy and spend more time in church meetings.

We often make similar efforts in the local church. Trying to ensure quality and to give lay volunteers the skills, confidence, and motivation for doing ministry, we expect certification or participation in specific church programs. We leave out lay people who have prepared in other ways. In the UMC, Emmaus is an excellent program but it isn't the only way of discovering one's call, learning about Christian beliefs, or experiencing God. Lay Speaking courses are fine but they aren't the only way to learn how to communicate one's faith or lead in worship. Disciple Bible Study is outstanding but it isn't the only way to learn about the Bible.



■ **Global efforts**

We try to make our churches truly global by including members from all countries in every gathering, but this brings problems. Cultural differences, language differences, and travel costs make worldwide meetings expensive and communication hard. In addition, many church members get turned off when the church gives higher

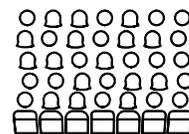


priority to faraway programs than to close-to-home ministries. And some ways of making the church more global, like the current proposal from the UMC's Connectional Process Team, would create more levels of bureaucracy when we need less. UMC General Conference delegates need to consider these potentially harmful results when they vote.



■ **Skills, interest, information, experience**

Members at all levels of the church must consider how to insure that board members will have the skills and information necessary for faithful decision-making. When we choose UMC general-board members merely because they're conference delegates or live in the right place or belong to the right sex or minority group, a board may have few members with the skills and experience the board needs. Staff members will furnish needed skills, but if board members don't have some too, they can't intelligently evaluate information and advice they get from the staff.



A businessman on the governing board of one of the UMC's largest operations sees the UMC suffering from this problem. "What this board does is big business," he reports, "but besides me, the board has only one other member with any business experience." A member of the finance committee of another board—one that controls valuable property and has a large budget—feels inadequate because he knows almost nothing about financial management except what staff members and consultants tell him.

Assigning members to boards and committees without regard to their skills and interests also discourages participation. A therapist on a UMC general board asked to be on its committee that deals with

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.



social problems whose effects she sees daily in her work, but she was put on another committee instead. "I no longer feel much need to attend the meetings," she said recently, "because I can contribute so little to the discussions and I have so little interest in the subjects my committee deals with."

Of course, if a board or committee only includes experts and insiders it gets a narrow, one-sided view. To avoid that, such a group needs to inform the rest of the church and seek others' opinions often, about everything the group is considering and proposing. Our frequent failure to do that may do more harm than our failure to provide diversity in every group.

Time to become informed, vote, and pray

When church decision-makers consider proposals and elect board members, they need to consider the possible harmful effects of their choices as well as the helpful ones. Other church members need to become informed about current proposals, to vote whenever they're allowed to, and to communicate their views to delegates and board members. Our prayers are important too. They can help all our views and votes to reflect God's will.



Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504-3629

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There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.
—Ephesians 4:4-6

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
—Galatians 3:28

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.
—Romans 14:2

We have gifts that differ ...
—Romans 12:6



Everything is clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. ...
—Romans 14:21-22