

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A dangerous policy

When I recently wanted to send a book as a gift to the lay and clergy members of my United Methodist Annual Conference—the UMC decision-making body for the geographical area I live in—I found that I couldn't get the list of current conference members' names and addresses. Conference leaders had instituted a policy, I found, of giving the list only to people who needed it for making official conference mailings.



Such a policy turns the United Methodist system of representative government into something dangerously like a dictatorship. By prohibiting the distribution of non-official information and opinions, this kind of policy lets a few insiders control much of the church's decision-making. It deprives other members of information they need for weighing the merits of all sides of important issues.



Restricting the distribution of information and ideas isn't limited to the UMC, of course, but it's apparently widespread there. What I'm relating here is what I learned when I checked with about a dozen UMC Annual Conferences all across the U.S., out of a total of about seventy.

A selective, unpublicized policy

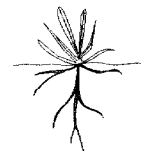
The policy about giving out the list usually doesn't get publicized, it seems, so few conference members even know it exists. It tends to be adopted informally by a few conference officials, not by a vote of the conference members.



Some Annual Conferences, I learned, occasionally give their membership list to someone for a non-official purpose, but only if that person's reason for wanting it is approved by the conference's official guardian of the list. One conference official whom I asked about list policies cited the example of someone who had gotten the list in a previous

A devastating effect

"Grass-roots United Methodists and other watchers are struck by . . . a seeming reluctance to provide forthright information . . . about 'controversial' issues." These watchers also see very few ways for rank-and-file members to influence the UMC. That's the view of M. Garlinda Burton, who for years has worked with church-related and secular media and is now editor of the *Interpreter* magazine, a UMC publication. Burton presents her views in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church* (Abingdon Press, 1999), the latest volume in the *United Methodism and American Culture* series (Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell, editors).



Like many other knowledgeable church observers, Burton is concerned about what she sees as the UMC's invisibility in public communications media—I'll say more about this subject in a later issue of *Connections*—but she's also concerned about the ways in which restricting information fuels widespread suspicion among rank-and-file United Methodists.



Fear of stirring up a fuss

As an example Burton cites her coverage of the 1985-88 revision of *The United Methodist Hymnal*. When she reported the deluge of letters that persuaded the revision committee not to remove "Onward Christian Soldiers," she says, "leaders were upset that media had 'stirred up a fuss' and 'upset the people in the pew.'" Burton and others, however, found that being fully informed about the debates gave grass-roots church members "a renewed sense that their opinions mattered to someone in leadership."



She tells about numerous other episodes that have ended less positively. "Pressure continues from some agency heads and episcopal leaders," she finds, "to keep controversy and 'negative' information out of the hands of the church and public media—and, therefore, away from the rank and file."

The result? "The church continues to lose credibility with each attempt to control information." Members draw wrong conclusions. They see leaders merely trying to protect each other, unwilling to confront the tough issues. Efforts to restrict information, Burton finds, have "a devastating effect on the credibility of the church bureaucracy among both grass-roots members and the public."



year and had written members urging them to withhold financial support of a church program he opposed. The official explained, "Of course we can't allow this kind of thing to happen!"

We not only *can* allow it. We *must* allow it if we care about our churches' integrity. Otherwise we're treating members like children, who aren't able to evaluate what they hear and thus need it censored. We're also denying our claimed belief that all members—not just top officials—are the church.

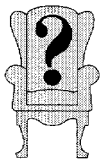
Three main reasons

The conferences I heard from gave three main reasons for not giving out their membership lists.

[1] Keeping Annual Conference members from campaigning for election as delegates to General Conference.



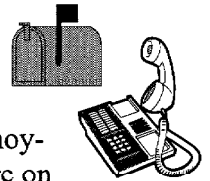
This aims at keeping members who can afford expensive mailings from having an unfair advantage. However, it could keep Lay Members, who don't know each other as clergy do, from getting information that would help them evaluate potential General Conference delegates. That would be a hindrance rather than a help.



Even if preventing this campaigning is desirable, it might be accomplished in some way that wouldn't prevent other uses of the Annual Conference membership list. Because the General Conference delegate election happens only once every four years, letting it control a policy that applies year-round every year seems unnecessary.

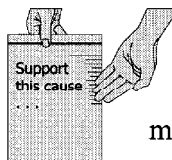
[2] Keeping Annual Conference members from getting ads or solicitations from businesses.

Accomplishing this is nowhere near important enough for denying all access to the list. Getting ads for unwanted products or services is annoying, but we'll get them whether we're on an Annual Conference list or not. Besides, getting them doesn't require responding or even reading them. All that's necessary is throwing them in the trash or hanging up. When we let church officials protect us from them, we give up important access to information in exchange for a very minor benefit.



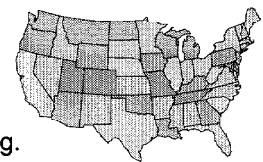
[3] Keeping Annual Conference members from getting views that oppose or even question UMC policies or methods.

This is the really dangerous reason for refusing to give out the list. It is evidently very appealing to UMC officials, however, because it makes their job of enforcing current policies easier. It's a way of maintaining control. It helps to keep church members unaware of alternatives to current methods and policies and of the possible need for change. It thus keeps members quieter and easier to manage than they might be if they had more information.



Most requests for Annual Conference lists evidently come from advocacy groups who want to send members newsletters and other mailings urging the members to take actions that the advocacy groups favor. Occasional requests come from individuals for this purpose, but these evidently are rare, probably because few individuals

To help non-United-Methodists who want to understand what I'm saying here about the UMC, here's a summary of the UMC system of government. The UMC is divided into conferences. An Annual Conference is a geographical area of the U.S.—a state or part of a state or, in the case of very small or sparsely populated states, more than one state. However, Annual Conference also means the annual decision-making meeting for that area—very confusing.

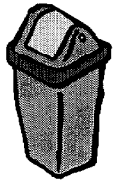


For their annual meetings, each Annual Conference has an equal number of Clergy Members and Lay Members. Every UMC clergyperson is a member for life, but the Lay Members are elected yearly as representatives from local congregations. Thus there's a continual turnover in Lay Members, with many new each year. Every congregation gets at least one Lay Member, but congregations over a certain size get a number proportional to the congregation's size.



Every four years the Annual Conference members elect delegates to General Conference, the worldwide UMC decision-making body. Only Clergy Members vote on clergy delegates, and only Lay Members vote on lay delegates. Competition for these spots can be fierce.

are willing or able to furnish the money and labor necessary for sending such a large mailing.

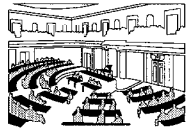


As justification for refusing to give the list to individuals or groups who want to advocate their views, some conference officials say they feel obligated to keep members from getting this kind of mail because the members find it a nuisance, like commercial junk mail. However, this reason isn't convincing, because recipients are free to trash this mail like any other unwanted mail, and to reject whatever view it advocates.

(As another reason for not giving out the list, some conference officials mentioned the monetary cost. However, requiring the list requester to cover the cost could easily take care of this.)

Destroying the intent of our system

The legitimate way of combating views that one opposes is to provide information and views that are more convincing, not by trying to stifle the views one disagrees with. When UMC officials only allow the expression of opinions and information that support official policies and methods, they destroy the effect that our representative system of church government is meant to have. Annual Conference members need to hear church members' views and to take them into account in making the church's decisions.

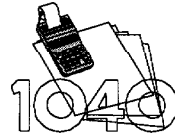
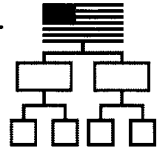


In agreeing to be an Annual Conference member, every member incurs the obligation to be accessible to church members who want to express their views, whatever those views may be. This is the obligation that everyone who is elected as a representative to any decision-making body incurs, whether the body is the U.S. Congress, a local school board or city council, the local-church Administrative Board, or any other decision-making body that is part of a representative system of government. All such elected representatives are likely to be contacted by some people whom the representatives disagree with or find annoying, but that goes with the job.

We'd be horrified

We'd be horrified—and justifiably so—if we wanted to write a U.S. Representative or Senator to

let him or her know our views on an issue that Congress would be deciding, and we were told that citizens weren't allowed to have Congress members' names and addresses. Refusing to let church members have the names and addresses of the people who represent them in church decision-making bodies amounts to the very same thing.



We'd be appalled—and justifiably so—if in order to get the names and addresses of members of Congress we had to get official approval for the view we wanted to express to them. We'd be shocked if we said "I want to ask them to abolish the Income Tax" and were told, "You're not allowed to express that view to them." Giving the Annual Conference list only for supporting current church policies and doctrines amounts to the same thing.

Different from other church-related lists

Protecting the Annual Conference membership list is entirely different from protecting other kinds of church-related lists—a local congregation's membership list, for example, or my *Connections* mailing list (which I don't give to anyone). Unlike the Annual Conference members, people on those other lists aren't the elected representatives to a decision-making body.

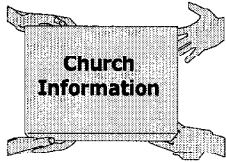


Evidently most UMC Annual Conferences put the previous year's list of Annual Conference members' names and addresses in the conference Journal, a book that is published each year and is usually available to whoever wants to buy a copy. However, many addresses on the Journal list are no longer current. More important, that list includes many lay people who were members of the previous Annual Conference session but won't be members of the next one. They aren't the ones a person who wants to influence future decisions needs to contact.



Other information also gets hidden

Conference officials' refusal to let church members have the list of the representatives to church decision-making bodies isn't the only instance of concealing information that needs to be



available. Some Annual Conferences also refuse to give out the annual list of clergy salaries, ages, tenure in current appointments, membership and attendance figures, and other such job-related information. All this information should be readily available to all clergy, whose income depends on how the system is being administered. It should also be easily available to all lay church members, who furnish that income and share responsibility for the church's effectiveness or ineffectiveness.

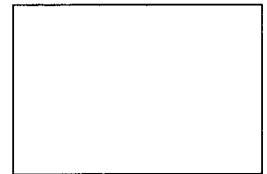


Information that belongs to the church

Efforts to hide church information from members and to keep them from expressing opposition to church policies are unjustified, dangerous, and harmful to the church. I hope that Annual Conference members won't put so much importance on trivial benefits like being protected from getting mail they'd rather not get, that they'll keep letting only a few church officials have the information and therefore the power that rightfully belong to the whole church.



Barbara



Information gives power

In the church as in any other group, the people with information that others want have power. Power can come from spreading information or from withholding it.



Church insiders—office staff, clergy, and members of certain boards and committees—often have information that other members don't have. These insiders can influence opinion by spreading only the information that supports their views. Also, when a decision is to be made in a meeting, the insiders can get their position adopted while the members who didn't have the information in advance are still trying to think what to do.

To avoid being overpowered, members who want a voice must have the information that the insiders have.

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