

# The UMC Discipline: a parallel power structure to the American administration of the nation

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This article will focus on the difficulties for Methodists outside the United States to follow the structure of The United Methodist Church as described in its *Book of Discipline*. Especially delegates from United Methodist annual conferences outside the US are confused at the General Conference because they are not familiar with the law-making system used to lead the church. My main point of reference is Europe, and my several points about the American political system and its impact on Methodism are drawing on my comparisons with European countries. The UMC judicial administration follows an American praxis, a praxis that is also different from the understanding of judicial practice in many other countries. This article asks two related questions. First, where do we find the theology behind these ecclesial structures? Secondly, have we as United Methodists misunderstood Wesley's maxim that "the world is my parish" to justify imperialistic thinking?

## John Wesley's "Book of Discipline"

John Wesley never had a "Book of Discipline," and he never attempted to create one or anything similar. Wesley was a presbyter of the Anglican Church, and he was loyal to the theology and the ecclesiastic structure and administration of this church all his life. Frank Baker has showed in his classical study from 1970, *John Wesley and the Church of England*,<sup>1</sup> how Wesley's thinking and his lifelong function as a pastor, even a pastor with supervising responsibilities, was completely loyal to Anglican theology and praxis and to the structure of the church, even when he initiated the new independent Methodist Episcopal Church in America.

Methodism in England during Wesley's lifetime was a movement and an ecclesiastic structure within the Anglican Church, and not until a generation after the death of John Wesley did Methodism in England become independent from the Anglican Church and formed its own ecclesiastic structure. Wesley was so keen on his loyalty to Anglicanism that, when the foundation of Wesley Chapel, City Road, London, was laid, he proclaimed that: "Whenever the Methodist leave the Church, God will leave the Methodists."<sup>2</sup> Wesley repeated this statement several times to underline that schism, splitting in itself is a sin. Wesley's attitude to the Anglican Church is also expressed in his statement: "the Church of England is the most scriptural national church in the World."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, Frank, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, Epworth Press, London, 1970

<sup>2</sup> Wesley *Works* Vol 3, "Sermon 112," p. 589:30-31

<sup>3</sup> Wesley *Works* Vol 9, "Farther Thought on Separation from the Church" p. 538:5-7

But how did the ecclesiastic structure and power function in Wesley's church? In the same way as most established churches in Europe. The Anglican church did not have a comprehensive and united text with a constitution, faith and order agreements, and laws with all regulations of the function of the church. In fact, very little principal and policy texts and administrative texts are written in the established churches in Europe. The reason for that is that all churches of the people have grown out of history, and the churches follow the praxis and the theology of the tradition. When disagreements arose or new questions demanded new decisions, the history of the church, the Tradition, formed the basis of how to proceed.

Civil laws give some ecclesiastic framework for the life and governance of the church whereas The Articles of Religion gives theological directions for the church. Concerning these articles, we need to say that they are not the complete doctrinal standard of the church. In the same way as the Augustana Confession and the Heidelberg Confession on the European continent, the Articles of Religion are strongly influenced and strongly limited to the issues relevant during the time of reformation and they mostly address issues of conflict in the church. The Articles of Religion are historical bound to the history of Anglican independency from Catholicism.

In the Anglican Church, the Book of Common Prayer may be the most powerful tools of doctrinal standard and discipline. What is the Book of Common Prayer? The Book of Common Prayer is the instrument to determine and decide all important issues about the life and praxis of the church. In the Book of Common Prayer, we find the main expressions of theology on regular worship services, membership, baptism, wedding, ordination and many actions of the church. Also, the confessional part of theology, the identity of the church, is included in the Book of Common Prayers, e.g., the ecumenical creeds and other texts used in the liturgy of the church. Liturgy is a main instrument to state the confessional standard of theology, including definition of sacramental understanding, understanding of the ordained ministry and the function of the episcopacy.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Geoffrey Wainwright wrote a complete systematic theology including ecclesiology with the resources from liturgy and worship.<sup>5</sup> This presentation is completely in harmony with Anglican theology. The liturgical resources regulate the public worship and services of the church, and these resources incorporate many elements of what we in the UMC have in the *Book of Discipline*. Wainwright's powerful book opens the question to modern Methodism: Is the liturgy and the worship of the church still an instrument for doctrinal development and standard, or has the *Discipline* taken over that authority? If so, judicial power has taken the power of liturgy. What theology is that?

If the liturgical dimension of ecclesiology has any doctrinal authority you could lift up the position that the issue of same-sex marriage and ordination of practicing homosexuals is a liturgical issue, and those in the church who perform marriages and ordination normally are the persons who made the decisions around same-sex persons in the same way as they made the decisions around heterosexual persons, and if the decision is difficult, they can always consult with the supervising ministers. It is not an issue for a conference, but rather an issue for the ordained ministers performing the liturgy. The Article of Religion XXII clearly says "rites and ceremonies should not in all places be the same; for they have always been different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's

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<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, William Clowes & Sons, London

<sup>5</sup> Wainwright, Geoffrey, *Doxology*, Oxford Press 1980

manners. Every particular church may ordain, change, or abolish rites and ceremonies.” Remember the status of the Article of Religion—they are not only part of the Constitution, they even have the highest doctrinal status by being part of the very few things restricted that “the General Conference shall not revoke or change.”<sup>6</sup>

Included in John Wesley’s “Discipline” is history as an important normative principle for the church. In harmony with this assertion, we need to understand Wesley’s historical writings. Wesley wrote two major historical works, each of them five volumes.<sup>7</sup> In these historical works, Wesley writes the history of the church from Ancient Christianity, through the Romans, French, Germans, and English. This is meant to be a comprehensive church history that links the Jesus-movement in Israel to Wesley’s own period. He shows how the theology, the ecclesiology and the life of the church is developing. In this description the church is one, completely united church through history and cultures. His final main chapter in these ecclesiastical history books is titled: “The people called Methodist.” Wesley’s writings do not identify Methodism as a church or a movement, but as a people, a people connected with other Christian people of nations and cultures, having the same one Christianity. Because history and tradition are authoritative in doctrinal matters, Wesley often makes decisions about practical church-life based on arguments from history. When Methodism emphasizes tradition in the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral, this position is underlined strongly by Wesley’s writings of church history and how the collected knowledge of the life of the church is normative for decisions in modern church. A church with no knowledge about its own history has no instruments to navigate its development in the future. History is normative for theology, inclusive of its ecclesiology.<sup>8</sup>

### **Wesley’s “Discipline” in his decision to establish a church in America**

Wesley didn’t have a Book of Discipline to base his decisions on before sending Dr. Thomas Coke to America with the task to form an episcopal church. We have Wesley’s letter to Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury and “our Brethren in North-America,” written in Bristol on September 10, 1784.<sup>9</sup> In that letter, Wesley gives instructions about what he understands as authorities and normative texts on ecclesiastic issues. You can say that here we find what Wesley held as his “Discipline.” Wesley talks about “civil-laws” as the framework for a church institution, and because the state of America was constituted as a secular nation and thus has no civil-laws concerning ecclesiastical structures, which is totally different from all European states, this created an opening for an independent, self-constituted church, different from Wesley’s own church. Wesley quoted Lord Peter King for his history on the episcopacy and uses this foundation in history to legalize his own right as an ordained presbyter to perform ordination of other presbyters and consecration of superintendents, the so-called presbyter-bishops. Wesley gave his revision of the Articles of Religion and his revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, named *Sunday Service*. And he gave the new church a sung liturgy, his *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns*. One cannot forget that Wesley’s hymns first of all were theological texts, a catechism in poetry, and in this understanding also doctrinal standards.

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<sup>6</sup> UMC *Discipline* 2016, ¶ 17 and ¶ 104 Rel. Art. XXII

<sup>7</sup> Wesley, John, *A Concise History of England*, Foundry, London, 1775

Wesley, John, *An Ecclesiastical History*, City-Road, London, 1781

<sup>8</sup> Wesley, John, *Christian Library*, Vol 1-50, William Pine & Felix Farley, Bristol 1749-55. In these selected collections of texts from the whole comprehensive Church History, Wesley focus on Tradition and how Tradition is normative for theology, including ecclesiology

<sup>9</sup> *Minutes of Christmas Conference and General Conference* Baltimore, January, 1785. Lovely Lane Museum

Finally, Wesley offered his *Sermons*. How do we understand the sermons as doctrinal standards? In the Protestant churches in continental Europe, the Augustana Confession and the Heidelberg Confession were texts dealing with all the issues of conflicts and protesting that came out of the continental Reformation. These confessions gave Protestant churches their identity by defining the doctrinal boundaries: where do we have correct doctrine, and where do we have the heresy? These boundaries defined the churches. In Anglican history, there isn't the same focus on the boundaries because the conflict at the time of the Reformation did not split the church in the British Islands. That is the reason why Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote or ordered other theologians to write standard sermons to define what is the center of Christianity. The so-called Edwardian 21 homilies, listed in Article of Religion XXXV, are examples of the clear and central dimension of Christian doctrines. Anglican theology did not have their focus on the boundaries in the same way as we see in the Protestant Churches on the European continent. Wesley came from the Anglican tradition of standard homilies. He wrote a number of sermons that had the same function to clearly mark the center of Christianity, not the boundaries. Wesley's presentation of several of these sermons in the very same Saint Mary Church in Oxford where Thomas Cranmer was judged and burned during the short Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Queen Mary underlines the perspective. That is, Wesley was indeed the theologian who completed the Reformation in the Anglican Church. Wesley's standard sermons gave the new church in America an instrument to form the new denomination. Again, we should bear in mind Geoffrey Wainwright's book, *Doxology*, which points out the Methodist tradition uses the fundamental language of theology, the language of liturgy and preaching, as the basis of its doctrinal formulations, and *not* to mark its boundaries. Worship marks the very center of Methodism.

### **Founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America**

Thomas Coke came to America with a given task from John Wesley. He himself was consecrated superintendent and appointed to oversee the Methodist connection in America. The letter from Wesley stated that the given task was not only to Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, but to "the Brethren in North-America." When the "Brethren," all the preachers, were called and gathered in Baltimore to the Christmas Conference in 1784 and continuing directly into conference in January 1785, they did not follow the directions given in Wesley's letter of instruction.

Instead, Wesley's order was overruled with the decision to form a democratic body, the General Conference, different from the ecclesiastic structure that Wesley was loyal to. And then the decision was made in the General Conference to consecrate Francis Asbury, first as deacon, then as presbyter, and finally as superintendent.<sup>10</sup> Because the result of the democratic election of the General Conference was the same as what Wesley had decided, very little attention has been made to this. But in fact, it was a major change that the General Conference was created and empowered as the leading body. It changed the power structure within the church immediately. And it changed the understanding of the power of the superintendent.

The new Episcopal Church in America followed most recommendations from John Wesley, but not all of them. Wesley was a reformer of Anglican tradition in the sense that he revised the Articles of Religion. From that perspective, the new Methodist Episcopal Church became

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<sup>10</sup> Mathews, James K. *Set Apart to Serve*, Abingdon 1985, p. 94-104

a reformed version of the Anglican Church. In Wesley's revision he deleted all references to relations between church and state, and especially the relation and loyalty to the King of England and his jurisdiction as the head of the Church. Most clearly, Wesley included no Article of Religion on state-church relations. But on this point, American Methodism soon approved a new paragraph, Article of Religion XXIII. Why did they do that? Wesley didn't see any need for an article on state-church relations. Was it an attempt to indicate that Methodism had the role of an established church in the new world? Was it to say that some laws in the state administration will have some ecclesiastic prerequisites? Was it to say that Methodism in America is an American church, fully integrated into American culture and its political system?

Today, after the union in 1968, all agencies of the UMC, the Council of Bishops, the administration of General Conferences, and the Africa University Tennessee entity have their headquarters within the United States, and therefore they are working under the state-church relation, formulated in the Article of Religion XXIII. But all their work outside the United States is not following the state-church relation in the same Article of Religion. In the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Article XVI, we find a text about church-state relations, but here the state is not fixed to one specific nation or state, only the "civil government" in any places.

The location of the American flag in front of many local United Methodist Churches gives the impression to new-comers that here we have a nationalistic American Church. Stars and Stripes do not indicate a global church or a supranational church or a multi-cultural church, and it is hard to find any other churches with the national flag inside the church in any other countries. Why has this tradition with the national flag been important?

When American Methodism spread back to continental Europe because of migration, the context of new Methodist churches in Europe absolutely understood that here comes an American Church. When the first Methodist Church in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1865 was consecrated, it was the American Ambassador, Mr. Wright, from Berlin who came up and did the full ceremony.<sup>11</sup> When the Danish Methodist Church applied to the Danish state for approval and the right to perform weddings, and the state was slow to answer, the American presidential candidate Ulysses Grant wrote the Danish state, and the approval was given. Also, the first American Ambassador in Copenhagen, Dr. Cramer, played an important role in inspiring the Danish State to accept Methodism as a church in Denmark. Ambassador Cramer was a brother-in-law to President Grant. What is my point? My point is that in many European countries, Methodism was understood as an American Church, even an American embassy church, in the same way as we here in Copenhagen have an English, a Russian, a Norwegian, and a Swedish church, all representing countries and states.

### **The legislative, executive and judicial power of the church**

The constitution of the United States of America was a formation of a secular nation and a formation of a nation built on the enlightenment philosophers' understanding of a balanced national administration with separate legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

Russell E. Richey shows in his book *Early American Methodism* how the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America developed parallel to this philosophy of the nation.

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<sup>11</sup> Haagensen, A. *Den Norsk-Danske Methodismes Historie*, Chicago 1894, p. 287

The ongoing steps in building up the ecclesiastical structure of the church was as a mirror of the parallel building up the democratic structure of the new nation, the new union of states.<sup>12</sup> How did this parallel history influence the structure and theology of American Methodism?

On the issue of superintendents, the first step in the development was that the General Conference in 1788 titled Coke and Asbury as Bishops. When Wesley heard that, we have one of the harshest reactions ever from him: “How dare you suffer yourself to be called ‘bishop’? For my sake, for God’s sake, for Christ’s sake put a full end to this!”<sup>13</sup> Wesley saw that the Americans tried to develop the episcopacy in the same direction as the Anglican Bishops, not in Wesley’s understanding that we have a presbyter-episcopacy. After Wesley passed away, the title Bishop was fully used in American Methodism.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, we find in American Methodism a tension between the power of conference and the power of the episcopacy. This tension Richey called the episcopal language of the church in conflict with the republican language of the church. The first split in American Methodism came when James O’Kelly and his republican fellows, primary in the state of Virginia, conflicted with Francis Asbury because they found that his leadership as bishop was too powerful compared to the conference. O’Kelly claimed that he was almost on the same understanding of the episcopacy as John Wesley. Asbury developed more in the direction of the Anglican bishops.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, the episcopacy developed over time to become the main executive power of the church. The bishops don’t have the right to vote in General Conference, and they should not influence the law-making process. This structure changes the very common understanding of the episcopacy in the whole of church history that the ministry of the bishop is a teaching ministry, a ministry of doctrine. How can bishops hold the responsibility of keeping up correct Christian doctrines if they don’t have the right to participate in the process of deciding new laws with doctrinal implications? The idea that the episcopacy has the executive power has pushed the role of bishops in the direction of being general secretaries of an NGO organization or executive directors of a company. And when recruiting new bishops, the qualities of being a good manager and administrator, good knowledge of civil law, and fundraising abilities very easily takes priority over qualities of good exegesis, systematic theology, and pastoral care ministry. What kind of theology is that?

Finally, the episcopacy in the UMC has developed to become very powerful within the church. As mentioned, the tension between episcopacy and conference was clear from the very beginning. In British Methodism, we find the same tension after the death of John Wesley. In British Methodism, the conference was the strongest part, and they decided to limit the power of the episcopal function. The way they did it was to elect a new presiding officer every year. And so it is today in British Methodism. The general superintendency of the church is one of the presbyters, who for one year chairs the conferences, leads the ordinations, and does other representative duties. Having this structure, no general superintendents after John Wesley have the long time in ministry to be powerful and dominating as a bishop in the Anglican Church, who is in the ministry of a bishop for

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<sup>12</sup> Richey, Russell E. *Early American Methodism*, Indiana University Press 1991

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, John, *Letters VIII*, p. 91

<sup>14</sup> Matthews, James K. *Set Apart to Serve*, Abingdon 1985, p. 118-125

<sup>15</sup> Norwood, Fredrick A. *The Story of American Methodism* Abingdon 1974. p. 124-129

lifetime. The structure of British Methodism allowed a large group of presbyters in the conference to serve the equivalent role of a bishop.

American Methodism went in the opposite way. The function of bishops was made more powerful. Lifetime episcopacy itself has over time made episcopal power very strong, especially when you have a *Book of Discipline* recommending that almost all other positions in the church shall be limited to some years, and when most elections are recommended to have new persons in the position. The bishops will always be the most powerful because they are the most experienced. Another development is that many boards and institutions of the church have a divided power between three groups, the laity, the presbyters, and the bishops. This is the case in most General Conference agencies, boards, and committee. Why the bishops are a separate group from the presbyters is very difficult to understand given Wesley's theology insistence that bishops are presbyters in a specific administrative function and not a separate order of the clergy.

Another specific issue is this: how did the church develop the structure of Council of Bishops? No other Protestant church has a structure similar to a Council of Bishops. The *Book of Discipline* set the parameters for the function and roles played by the Council, but we have no theology of the ecclesiastic meaning and function of the Council of Bishops.<sup>16</sup> But it is very clear in the life of UMC that the Council of Bishops is a very strong power structure, and that the council has a strong influence on legislation in the General Conference, contrary to the idea that bishops are the executive branch of the church, and because of that, they should not vote or influence the process of legislation. What kind of theology is that?

### **Federal and democratic structure**

General Conference became more and more a legislative body similar to the House of Representatives where American law-making took place. This characteristic of the General Conference becomes evident after 1968, when The United Methodist Church was founded with a new structure and new content in the *Book of Discipline*. General Conference has delegates from each Annual Conference according to their sizes, the same system as the House of Representatives, where large states have more delegates compared to smaller states. The House of Representatives (and Senate) makes the laws for the whole United States; the General Conference (and Council of Bishops) make the laws for the whole global UMC.

Something new happened in the power structure of American Methodism when American Methodism grew and annual conferences were organized in each state with most Annual Conferences having their own Bishop. Annual conferences and the individual Bishops became a decentralized federal structure. The Council of Bishops is constructed in the same way as the House of Senate, one or two persons from each unit of the Federation, the same vote from large and small units.

John Wesley, in his letter to establish the Methodist Episcopal Church, was aware of the civil laws in America and the differences between national laws and state laws, with implications for the church. "A civil authority is exercised over them, partly by the Congress, partly by the State Assemblies." Wesley was aware that the new church should function in a civil society

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<sup>16</sup> UMC *Discipline* 2016, ¶ 47, p. 40

with the tension between “the State Assemblies” a decentralized Federal and “the Congress” a central Democratic structures and implications for ecclesiastical issues.<sup>17</sup>

In the American political world, we have the tension, perhaps the polarization, between each individual states, the decentralized federal and a national centralized democratic policy, directly linked to the two main parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. This tension we can see in the last 160 years history of America, even though the two parties have shifted positions over the decades. In modern times, we have new tensions around issues of abortion and climate policy, where strong voices polarize the whole culture in America. What power is given to Capitol Hill, and what power is given to each of the states? In the United Methodist Church, we have the same struggles between power given to the annual conferences and power given to the General Conference. Am I right if I say that until now the power of the General Conference has been stronger than the power of the annual conferences? At least the ongoing conflict over the issue of human sexuality has shown that the General Conference has taken the main power. Some annual conferences have tried to take power, but it is not clear who will finally have the victory.

### **Judicial Administration – the third power**

The philosophers of the enlightenment saw the judiciary branch as the third independent power structure of the state. American Methodism developed a similar power structure, now mostly concrete in the Judicial Council of the UMC.

All nations worldwide have a system of judicial administration and especially a supreme court as a third court where decisions can be appealed. But in the United States, the Supreme Court has the right to cancel a piece of legislation if the new legislation is in conflict with the constitution. We see in the American political life that many issues from the civil legislation of the country are overruled by the Supreme Court. Because of this kind of judicial mandate, the court itself has become a battleground for the struggle between conservative and liberal political forces. Because the Supreme Court has the authority to overrule legislation, the court itself has been a political instrument, even though the court should be independent of the law-making process.

The United Methodist Church has a parallel system, a Judicial Council where so-called Declaratory Decisions can be made and legislation cancelled with a null and void decision. Furthermore, in the UMC, we see conservative and liberal positions in the Judicial Council. The Judicial Council is also influenced by the church political conflicts. In most countries in Europe, the supreme court has no authority to declare a piece of legislation null and void. If a piece of new legislation is in conflict with the constitution of the country, that legislation goes back to the parliament for correction.

That the UMC has a Judicial Council with the authority to declare legislation decided by the General Conference null and void is only possible because the UMC has developed a power structure parallel to the American government. And to all Methodists coming from countries where no Supreme Court has this kind of power, it is a very strange system. What kind of theology is that?

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<sup>17</sup>*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences 1773 to 1794 under the superintendence of John Wesley, bishop Asbury and Coke*, Lovely Lane Museum



If we look into the kind of petitions and conflicts the Church Trials is dealing with, it is clear that during the whole history of UMC, the absolute majority of cases are coming from America.<sup>18</sup> In my 18 years as District Superintendent and 43 years as an elder in Methodist churches in Europe, I have no memory of any case concerning conflict resolution being appealed to a church trial in Europe, and I have no idea what kind of cases European Methodists should appeal to a church trial. Concerning Declaratory Decisions I can think of a few cases of petitions from Europe, but the overall experience tells me that the judicial administration described in the *Book of Discipline* is directly formed to cover the needs and the culture of America, and it has no meaning outside America. The Constitution ¶ 20 holds the important restricted rule that all clergy always have the privilege to appeal their case to a higher judicial court. Fine. But how could The United Methodist Church think that it is possible to have only one judicial system for the church, when the church covers so many countries and cultures, where the whole understanding of justice and fair trail are so different? The judicial administration of the UMC is American both in philosophy and in praxis, not global.

### **Global “every-thing” in the UMC**

Quite often the UMC quotes John Wesley’s “The World is my Parish,” to find support for global mission, global evangelism, global ministry, global board of something, and finally global nature of the church. I do not see any other Protestant churches with this global thinking and claim to hold a global nature. I do not find that the identity of being global is rooted in how any other Protestant denominations develop a global structure and governance of the church, not even in other Methodist churches. I find more often the claim to be an incarnational church in a concrete culture, and the claim to be incarnational is understood in opposition to be over-national, trans-cultural and global. I find more often that claims to be global weaken claims to be incarnational in concrete cultures.

John Wesley was a presbyter of the Anglican Church, and he was loyal to the theology and structure of the Anglican Church. As part of this structure, we find the system of dividing the country and the ministry of presbyters into parishes. A parish is a geographically defined area with a number of inhabitants and a local church institution with the responsibility to be church to serve the people in the area. Most European countries have the parish system, and in Wesley’s letter to form the Methodist church in America, one piece of the rationale is that America is not divided into parishes. An area of possible conflict in the parish system is when a pastor who is appointed to one parish recruits members to his own church from the neighboring parish, or more critically, if a pastor in one parish preaches and evangelizes in a parish where this pastor has no appointment. The parish system opens conflicts between clergy colleagues and competing congregations. The parish system we find in European churches is often described as institutions within the nation.

John Wesley several times came in conflict with clergy colleagues when he was preaching around the country. He tried to be loyal to the Anglican system by only preaching in churches when he was invited by the local pastor. But Wesley was a Fellow at Lincoln College in Oxford for 26 years, and in this capacity, he held a specific authority only given to College Fellows, and this authority was that he held the right to preach in all parishes. The reason was that students at the university came from the whole country, so the Fellows should have the authority to preach to them all. But after his leave from Oxford University, Wesley continued

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<sup>18</sup> *Book of Discipline* 2016 ¶¶ 2701-2719

to preach around the country. First, he gave the order that the Methodist should not have worship services near a local Anglican Church, and absolutely not at the time of ordinary services. Second, we find that Wesley's field preaching was in places where the Anglican Church didn't have a church building. Kingswood was a new upcoming industrial and mining area, and the Anglican Church had no building and no activity in that place. Wesley saw this place as the world different from the church. And so, all over the country, places where there was no church building and no church activities were accessible were the world, different from the parish church. In this historical context, Wesley was criticized for interfering with the local Anglican parish church, and he stated: "The World is my Parish," meaning, all places in England where the Anglican Church has no church building is the world, and Methodists are primarily working among people not attending the parish church. This was very shortly after Wesley's first field preaching in Kingswood. With the words "The World is my Parish," Wesley had no intension to spread Methodism to other countries, neither to the European continent nor to America. Methodism came to America and the European continent and Ireland without any decision taken by John Wesley.<sup>19</sup>

The United Methodist Church has used this quotation of John Wesley to support its global church thinking and structure. British Methodism has never gone this way. In British Methodism we find from the very beginning that mission in other countries is linked to the British Annual Conference as long as needed until the new mission is big and strong enough to be organized as an independent church. And then, the structural connection to the mother conference in England was cut. So it was in the time of Wesley where the Irish annual conference was independent of the British Annual Conference, and so it was with methodism in countries and colonies outside the British Isles. The British Annual Conference in modern times always has guests from all independent Annual Conferences coming out of British mission work, but no structure binds the churches in different areas together. British Methodism does not have a conference above the annual conference and no General Conference as a law-making body. British Methodism does not have federal tension in its thinking.

The United Methodist Church has built a hierarchic conference system, and I think the reason is that very early in the history of American Methodism we find federal thinking within the structure of the church and the new nation. So, when American Methodism early on had a structure similar to one ruling body for the whole country and another ruling body for the smaller units, it was very easy to put in new missions and new Annual Conferences and new bishops in countries outside United States into the American structure of church. In a way, the American ecclesiology was designed to be global and hierarchic al because of its federal nature, but with a strong foundation of always being American in culture, understanding of democracy, administration, and finances.<sup>20</sup>

For the first 75-100 years of American Methodism, the church developed in all its dimensions solely in the American context before mission and migration brought American Methodist to countries outside America.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the new mission churches planted all over the world after 1833 brought the American understanding of ecclesiology, conferencing, and theology

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<sup>19</sup> Wesley, John, *Works* Vol 19, "Journal," p. 66-67

<sup>20</sup> Frank, Thomas Edward, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of UMC*, Abingdon 1997, p. 203-262

<sup>21</sup> 1840-1910 was the intensive period where migration brought Methodism to continental Europe

to the new places.<sup>22</sup> Is it possible to make an ecclesiology, developed over many years in one nation, the global? The only way is to go in a decentralized federal direction.

### **Central Conferences are decentralized federal organizations**

When the structures for central conferences started to develop in the General Conference back in 1884, there was no theology of the global nature of the church. Quite the opposite, and in full harmony with the theology of the new mission of all the Protestant, evangelical churches, the theology was incarnational with a strong focus on the cultures and different civilizations all over the world. These ideas were the foundation for the ecclesiastic structures of central conferences. The basic paragraphs in the *Discipline* 2016 on central conference independency, self-governing leadership, and own central conference *Book of Discipline* are more than 120 years old. If the central conferences have used these paragraphs to develop themselves and take responsibility for own Practical Divinity, the Wesleyan method of theology developed out of the local praxis of the church, then I could have been a prophet saying: “The schism in global UMC in 2022 over the issue of human sexuality would never had a chance to spread from some annual conferences in the United States to any of the central conferences.” The crisis we have now over the issue of human sexuality is to some extent rooted in the facts that the central conferences have not developed into independency and self-governing churches with strong incarnational identities, as it was intended in the original vision for the central conferences. Why? I think the answer is different from continent to continent. In Europe, WWI and WWII totally damaged the work with church structure among the Methodist churches in the many annual conferences. And then the Cold War happened. It is very strange that Europe was divided with an iron curtain between Communist countries and West Europe. The iron curtain has been gone since 1989, but the conflict over the issue of homosexuality, in politics, in culture, and in religious institutions, follows the same iron curtain. Very strange! And two of the European UMC central conferences will split over the same issue, almost following the same iron curtain. It shows that the conflicts over the issue of homosexuality follows different borders and philosophic arguments on the North American and the European continent, and one and the same discussion over the issue is not possible.<sup>23</sup>

In Africa, it is my understanding that the central conference structure and organization never have been implemented, except for the function of electing Bishops. The female African theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye has developed a fascinating African theology with only little use of the history of doctrinal controversies in Europe, but it is my impression that Oduyoye’s theology is mostly studied outside Africa.<sup>24</sup> Concerning the Philippines, I don’t know, except the theology of culture and incarnational ecclesiology developed by Emerito P. Nacpil, former professor in Manila and bishop of the UMC.<sup>25</sup>

My point is that the central conference structure in the UMC is a necessary decentralized federal structure, and the potential to develop is already given in the *Discipline*, but not used by the central conferences. The doctoral dissertation from Yale University, written by Harry Wescott Worley in 1938, gives good wisdom for the development of central conferences according to the theology of mission and incarnational church. The interesting title is: *The*

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<sup>22</sup> Tuell, Jack M. *The Organization of The United Methodist Church*, Abingdon 1997

<sup>23</sup> “‘New House’ of Europe’ in *Book of Resolutions* 2000, p. 740-743

<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye, Mercy Amba, *Hearing and Knowing*, Orbis 1993. Oduyoye, Mercy Amba, “Teaching Authoritatively Amidst Christian Pluralism in Africa” In: Meeks, Douglas Edit., *What Should Methodists Teach?* Abingdon 1990, p. 69-82

<sup>25</sup> Langford, Thomas, *Practical Divinity*, Abingdon 1983, p. 252-254 “Emerito P. Nacpil”

*Central Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. A study in ecclesiastical adaptation, or a contribution of the mission field to the development of church organization.*<sup>26</sup> Maybe you can also say that the central conferences and their bishops have been too weak to develop the ecclesiastic structure given in the *Book of Discipline*. If so, we must criticize the Council of Bishops and their responsibility to have the general and global oversight with the church and ask: Why have bishops in more than 100 years accepted the lacking development of a non-satisfying ecclesiastic structure in the central conferences? Anyhow, by doing so little, the central conferences have some degree of responsibility that the American developed Methodist ecclesiastical structure and theology were adapted un-critical by the central conferences with no adaptations to local culture and civil administration and no will to be integrated into context. It is very problematic and a threaten to all remaining central conferences to stay in unity with the UMC.

A whole subject of study I am not familiar with is all the central conferences, which have become autonomous from The Methodist Church or the Evangelical United Brethren Church.<sup>27</sup> We could learn a lot about incarnational church and local formation of ecclesiastical structures if we focus on the conferences not included in the UMC any longer, and the reasons of imperialism why they disconnected and became autonomy churches.

In a private conversation with Emilio Castro in Denmark in 1995, I asked him why the Methodist churches in Latin America are no longer part of the UMC. His answer was that two issues led to the process of being autonomous churches. One issue was the UMC policy on alcohol and the claim on an abstinence lifestyle, especially for clergies. How should this policy function in Latin America with so many wine farmers and a different ethical standard? Another issue was that the mission engagement from American Methodism in Latin America was politically conservative, supportive of the shifting fascistic governments and evangelical “born again” theology, but Methodism in Latin America developed more in the direction of a Marxist theology of liberation,<sup>28</sup> social justice for the poor and criticism against the conservative government.<sup>29</sup> Rev. Emilio Castro was Methodist general secretary of the World Council of Churches 1985 to 1992.<sup>30</sup> Emilio Castro and Néstor González<sup>31</sup> were taken to prison in Uruguay by the conservative, fascistic government because of their socialist theological positions. Justo Gonzalez gives a brilliant theological presentation of the dominant theology in Latin America in his “Type C, Antiochian” theology in contrast with what he calls the dominant “Type A, Carthage” theology in evangelical, Northern American Protestantism.<sup>32</sup> And it is my understanding that this is the same deeper clash of two competing theologies we find in the modern UMC conflict over the issue of human

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<sup>26</sup> Worley, Harry Wescott, *The Central Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, The Christian Herald Mission Press, Foochow, China, 1940

<sup>27</sup> *Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 1939, ¶ 483 *The China Central Conference*, ¶ 484 *The Central Conference of Southern Asia*, ¶ 485 *The Latin America Central Conference*

<sup>28</sup> Bonino, José Míguez, “Reflections on the Church’s Authoritative Teaching on Social Questions” In: Meeks, Douglas Edit., *What Should Methodists Teach?* Abingdon 1990, p. 58-68. Bonino, José Míguez, “Wesley in Latin America: A Theological and Historical Reflection,” In: Maddox, Randy Edit., *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology*, Abingdon 1998, p. 169-182

<sup>29</sup> Langford, Thomas, *Practical Divinity*, Abingdon 1983, p. 250-252 “José Míguez-Bonino”. Míguez, Néstor O. “The Old Creation in the New, the New Creation in the Old,” In: Meeks, Douglas Edit., *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, Abingdon 2004, p. 53-72

<sup>30</sup> Castro, Emilio, *Sent Free*, WCC 1985

<sup>31</sup> Néstor González came to Denmark as a political refugee from Uruguay in 1981. He is the father to Rev. Virginia Hønnicke in Copenhagen, clergy member of the UMC Denmark Annual Conference

<sup>32</sup> González, Justo L. *Christian Thought Revisited*, Abingdon 1989, Revised Ed. Orbis 1999 p. 137-138

sexuality.<sup>33</sup> González formulates the clash thus: “Christianity does not consist in a series of doctrines or rules, but in the action of God incarnate in history.”<sup>34</sup>

What happened with all the mission work in India and Malaysia, an area where the most progressive and successful missionary E. Stanley Jones developed his reform of modern mission theology, not only influencing Christianity in India, but globally? E. Stanley Jones was the one who presented Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violence policy to Martin Luther King, Jr., and convinced him on the issues of human rights, using the ethics of the Social Principles in his PhD studies at Methodist Boston University. Did the conferences in India simply join the ecumenical new churches we find in India, e.g., the Church of South India in 1960? Or did the theology of Methodism in India develop in direction of Social Justice to the poor, and not in direction of American spirituality like the “second Great awakening” evangelism? Did Methodism in India grow in dialog with Buddhism and Hinduism in the same way as E. Stanley Jones’ “Ashrams?”<sup>35</sup> I don’t know, but I know that Methodism in India separated from American Methodism and became more incarnational.<sup>36</sup>

American Methodist mission started in China in 1835 and continued during more than hundred years. It was a very successful mission. Danish Methodist missionaries were accepted by the Chinese people during the time of the China-Japanese War and following the Mao Zedong revolution. Why did Chinese Methodism disconnect with American Methodism? Was it because American Methodism, like most evangelical churches in the West, developed a political anti-Marxist thinking?<sup>37</sup> Today, in 2022, the Christian churches in China have more members than the total number of Christian people in Europe, and the Methodists in China are included in that number. I have myself a contact to Professor Rev. Wen Ge, Theological Faculty, University of Nanking, and he is a member of a local church in the Wesleyan tradition, but the history to American Methodism has gone.<sup>38</sup> Korean Wesleyans is from the same tradition.<sup>39</sup>

According to Worley’s dissertation from 1938, we have had Central Conferences in: Southern Asia, Eastern Asia, South Africa, Latin America, Europe, China, India, Malaysia and Philippine Isles. The Central Africa, West Africa and Congo are later.

What will happen with the central conferences we have now if the central conferences in the future do not develop their own incarnational ecclesiastical culture for replacement of the uncritical imported culture of American Methodism? It will finally end the idea of being global.

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<sup>33</sup> Thaarup, Jørgen, *Human sexuality is not the main issue*, GBHEM Publishing, May 30, 2019

<sup>34</sup> González, Justo L. *Christian Thought Revisited*, Abingdon 1989, Revised Ed. Orbis 1999 p. 138. González, Justo L. “Can Wesley Be Read in Spanish?” In: Maddox, Randy Edit., *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology*, Abingdon 1998, p. 161-168

<sup>35</sup> Deminger, Sigfrid *Evangelist på Indiska Villkor*, Dissertation, Libris, Sweden 1985. Ariarajah, S. Wesley *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, WCC 1985

<sup>36</sup> Ariarajah, S. Wesley “Evangelism and Wesley’s Catholicity of Grace” In: Meeks, Douglas Edit., *The Future of The Methodist Theological Traditions*, Abingdon 1985

<sup>37</sup> Nielsen, Robert, *Missionshistorie*, Kurer-Forlaget, Denmark, p. 189-196

<sup>38</sup> Wen, Ge, *The Deep Coinherence: A Chinese Appreciation of NFS Grundtvig’s Public Theology*, Dissertation, Aarhus University, 2013

<sup>39</sup> Park, John Chun, “Christian Perfection and Confucian Sage Learning: An Interreligious Dialogue in the Crisis of Life,” In: Meeks, Douglas Edit., *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, Abingdon 2004, p. 119-148

## **Parallel structure to the civil administration of the country**

My thesis in this article is that the structure of the UMC over more than 200 years has developed into a parallel structure to the American state and national administration. Maybe the development of the General Conference and the work of the General Conference most clearly shows the parallel.

John Wesley created the Methodist conference. From 1744 Wesley called his preachers to annual conferences. The success of these conferences developed the theological understanding that the conference was a means of grace. The issues of the conferences and the focus areas was conversation about the life of the church, the mission, how to preach and develop the work. Items for discussion came out of the praxis of the church. The results of these annual conferences were The Minutes, often written as questions and answers. What is “minutes?” Minutes are not “laws,” but notes to remember the history and how we did church work in the actual time and culture. After a number of annual conferences, Wesley organized all the minutes into the Large Minutes, where all the notes of history were organized after subjects. But still, the conference and the minutes did not turn into a law-making-machine.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the preachers who participated in Wesley’s conferences moved to America, e.g., Francis Asbury, and in America we find conferences of the same kind beginning in 1773. At least we have the “Minutes of some conversations between the preachers in connection with the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, 1773 to 1785,” where the first General Conference was organized. The General Conference in 1785 and the following years didn’t change the character of the conference work. It was still conversations about the practical work. All the items for discussion came out of the practical work of the preachers, and no legislation was made, only minutes to remember the history and the good practices.<sup>41</sup>

The Methodists talk about “Holy Conferencing:” this idea comes from John Wesley and his way of doing conference, namely conversation and notes of our history. Wesley called church work in present time and the notes of our history “practical divinity.” We can call it practical theology or theology of experiences. But, in a way, it is the Anglican theology that history has doctrinal authority, because the development of theology comes from the life and the struggles of the church. But over time, and most clearly after 1968 when the UMC *Discipline* was formed with a constitution, a number of laws for church work, a Judicial Council, a separation of the power of legislation in General Conference from the executive power of bishops, and the strange construction of Council of Bishops, we have a clear parallel structure to the state and national administration of the United States.

When General Conference is in session for law-making, the so-called legislative process, the conference works after Robert’s Rules of Order. What are Robert’s Rules of Order? It is the parliamentary order of the two parliaments of Capital Hill in Washington.<sup>42</sup> The way of working is: first you have to formulate your petition, and this must be done no later than 230 days before the first session of General Conference.<sup>43</sup> The preparatory work in legislative committees follows the same pattern as in Congress. When the petition is on the agenda, then the delegates can speak in favor or against the petition or amend the petition. The way of working is the political way for and against, with the focus being to create new legislation.

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<sup>40</sup> Wesley, John, *Works* Vol 10, *The Methodist Societies, The Minutes of Conference*, Abingdon 2011

<sup>41</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences 1773 to 1794 under the superintendence of John Wesley, bishop Asbury and Coke*, Lovely Lane Museum

<sup>42</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, Vol 1, 2020, p. 29-71

<sup>43</sup> UMC *Discipline* 2016, ¶¶ 505 - 507

This parliamentary procedure creates polarization from the very beginning of the process. And then there are the strict time limits of speeches: two minutes, one minute. Who can say anything important in two minutes? You can state the position you had before the conference. It is not able to do what Wesley did in his conferences, where conversation started on a specific subject, and then the conversation maybe developed in some specific direction, and maybe the conversation matured into a decision, and a note of the conversation was put into the minutes, and if the conversation didn't mature or came to a final decision, the conversation could continue next time the conference gathered. This method did not polarize everything in the same way we see it in the General Conference now, and I think the polarization and the conflicts we experience at General Conference is influenced by the way we work. Why have we changed the General Conference into a law-making process, and why must all items end up in a specific paragraph in the *Book of Discipline*?

It is my understanding that annual conferences work very differently from how General Conference works, and it is my understanding that the annual conferences are similar to Wesley's conferences, but the General Conference has become something else. The theology of holy conferencing I see fully in the work of annual conferences, but very seldom in the legislative process of General Conference. A prayer before and after do not make the law-process neither holy nor Wesleyan.

Because General Conference is this law-making machine different from how annual conferences work and also very different from how central conferences work, delegates from outside America have major problems, first to understand the system and then to function and contribute to the process of conferencing. The American delegates control the system and are able to use the system in ways no delegates from outside America are able to do. Maybe I am wrong? American delegates sometimes also find themselves in confusing parliamentary situations over the legislative process at General Conference. So much time is lost over questions of right procedures and protests against the presiding officers. Sometimes annual conferences elect delegates with judicial competences to help the delegation to operate in General Conference.

It is my understanding that many delegates from outside America totally have given up on contributing to the work of General Conference. I do not have any statistics about the petitioners and where they come from, but it is my impression that also here we have a major dominance of petitions from America. My experience as delegate to General Conference covers five General Conferences, two of them as sub-committee chair and member of the committee on the agenda. The first two times as a delegate, you learn the system of order of the conference, the third time and the following times, you know the system and are able to contribute. But most delegates are not delegates three times or more. The experiences of being delegate is that a few delegates have been delegates many times, and they know the system and are in power of the democratic process, but most delegates struggle with the system and are not in control of their participation. My experience is that annual conferences function much better than the General Conference. The General Conference is experimental each time, and delegates have to learn every time. Is this different for American delegates compared with delegates from the central conferences? Yes, I think all central conference delegates find the General Conference very difficult to work with, because the system of conference work is so different from what they are used to in their home countries and also different from the type of political work going on in their home countries' national parliaments.

## When things go wrong

For many, many decades, The United Methodist Church didn't have any problems with its structure. When things go smoothly and gently, nobody asks critical questions of our ecclesiastic conference system. It is always in times of crisis and difficult challenges that focus are put on our system and structure. The crisis we have in The United Methodist Church over the issue of human sexuality has shown how our system is not functioning. The idea to govern a church on the basis of a global *Book of Discipline*, and to think that we can solve the problems by the law-making process in General Conference, has failed. And I am not sure our organization will ever solve the problems we are in now.

How have we ended up in a situation, where the *Book of Discipline* states that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” a statement only true in some limited groups in America? Seen in the perspective of ecumenical, Protestant, and even Roman Catholic theology through the whole history of Christianity, human sexuality has never been a subject of Christian teaching, Christian doctrines, or what Protestant theologians call *Status Confessionis*. Human sexuality is a subject of ethics, biblical exegesis, human rights, and civil law. And it is a subject of our understanding of marriage. To put a sentence that mark human sexuality as a subject for Christian teaching is a stupidity in the academic theological world outside some small groups in America. It seems to me that some American theologians have constructed their own definition of Christian teaching, or as the New Testament says, Christian διδασκω. According to Christian tradition and history, bishops hold the ministry of teaching, the responsibility of keeping the church to the creeds and basic doctrines, but in the UMC we have limited the bishops' power to influence the paragraphs in the Discipline, and by doing so, we have limited the bishops' ability to oversee even the *Book of Discipline* and to take away from the Discipline what is a theological stupidity.

The way we have organized Judicial Council also restricts their power of controlling that new legislation is not in violation of the Constitution, including our doctrinal standards. It is beyond debate that the sentence of homosexuality being incompatible with Christian teaching is not in conflict with our doctrinal standard because no creeds, no Article of Religions, nor other standards of Christian teaching have any paragraphs on human sexuality. There is no piece of text in our doctrinal standards that any human sexual praxis can be incompatible with. The Judicial Council has not succeeded in declaring this clearly wrong formulation null and void. Denmark Annual Conference appealed to the Judicial Council to declare the formulation null and void, but Judicial Council decided, built on a very old decision, a typical American judicial principle different from European judicial praxis, that Judicial Council cannot rule in a case not concrete even though it is clear that the formulation is in conflict with the Constitution. Our system is not functioning when it comes to doctrinal issues.<sup>44</sup>

General Conference after General Conference have had petitions on human sexuality on the table, but no decisions can be made as long as some American delegates agree with the *Discipline* that “human sexuality is a subject of Christian teaching,” and many other delegates find this formulation a stupidity and have stopped discussing the issue on these conditions many years ago, and are frustrated that our system, with Judicial Council's right to make declaratory decisions and the bishops' role to judge in doctrinal issues, has not solved this problem. Many European delegates have given up engaging in any changes in the Discipline on this critical issue.

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<sup>44</sup> UMC Judicial Council *Memorandum* 1347



One reason why American delegates and delegates from the central conferences are functioning in disharmony with Methodist theology and ecclesiology is that no central conference follows the *Discipline* in the same way the UMC follows the *Discipline* in America. It is even different from central conference to central conference which parts of the *Discipline* and which parts of the ecclesiastical structure have ever been implemented in the central conference churches. In Europe, we don't have the district organization, the local churches do not negotiate salaries for the pastors, the pension system and health insurance are in most places not an issue for the church, but for civil society, and the ceremonies of marriage are more similar to the tradition of the country than to the Book of Worship. The annual conferences outside America focus on Article of Religion XXII, saying clearly "that rites and ceremonies should not in all places be the same; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners."

American Methodism was first in using this Article to change the ceremonies of weddings from a ceremony fully integrated in a worship service in the church to a very short ceremony in a secular place, very different from weddings in Europe. From America, this ceremony of weddings in secular places distant from an ecclesiastical context has spread to many countries outside America.

The handling of finances, salaries, pension, health insurance, and human aid and money for mission work follow one system in America described more or less in the *Discipline*. In all central conferences other systems are used, and in these areas of administration the *Discipline* is almost not in use. Also, the general agencies play a very different role in America compared to the central conferences. Only their names are global.

When the central conferences have the situation that quite a number of paragraphs and ecclesiastical structures are not in use, not implemented, then the question is clear: Who decides which paragraphs in the *Discipline* shall be in function and which paragraphs are not important? Why shall we follow the paragraph saying that practicing homosexuals cannot be ordained, when we never have followed all the paragraphs on the structure of districts or the paragraphs directing the money flow in the church? Are our arguments from history that human sexuality is not a question of Christian teaching on the same kind of legality as John Wesley's argument from history based on Lord Peter King's theology that presbyters and bishops are the same when he consecrated Thomas Coke to be a superintendent? It is very difficult to understand in the central conferences that all paragraphs have the same authority. The central conferences decide themselves what is important and what is not.<sup>45</sup>

Even the understanding of democracy is different. In many cultures, the leader is the first to speak on a new subject of discussion, and democracy is understood voting loyally with the leader. In other cultures, this is considered dictatorship and overruling dominance. In other cultures, it is the democratic praxis that the leader listens to many voices, and when everyone has spoken, the leader can conclude the decision. As a delegate to General Conference, it is easy to see the differences between the delegations. In some delegations, all delegates are focused on the leader, who is the one to give his or her opinion first, then everyone votes in loyalty. It is even seen as a provocation if you speak up on a subject before the leader has marked his or her position. In other delegations, all members are in discussion, and the leader is more silent and more of a listener. Democracy is different in different places of the church. At General Conference the chair is always asking: "Do we have a second?" "Second!" In

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<sup>45</sup> Book of *Discipline 2016 Supplement*. Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference, Copenhagen 2017

Europe no chair will ever ask that question, and no member knows what a second is. And before you get an answer, the vote is taken. What happened? In General Conference committees, it is the normative praxis that the chair does not vote. In Europe it is the praxis, when you have a tie vote that the chair's vote determines the final outcome, the chair is always voting. How can anyone think that the General Conference can function after homogeneous ideas of democracy and after only one version of the *Discipline*, when the fact is that the use of the Discipline is different from region to region and the very fundamental understanding of democratic praxis is not the same?

### **A way forward**

When General Conference 2016 failed totally to find an acceptable way forward in the ongoing crisis, the decision was made to ask the Council of Bishops to appoint a commission on a way forward. It was a solution for the General Conference 2016. But a strange solution, and a solution that shows the problems of General Conference and its weak ability to work and govern the church. The General Conference transferred its own task and ability to the Council of Bishops.

General Conference 2019 totally failed again. Nearly an absurd situation, when the conference-approved Commission on A Way Forward presented a very good One-Church-Plan, and the majority of Bishops openly supported the plan, but nothing was approved in General Conference plenary session. A number of legislations was approved by the plenary session, even though the session was well informed about the unconstitutional character of the petitions, and immediately the approved legislation was declared null and void by the Judicial Council. General Conference 2019 was close to collapse of the UMC ecclesiastic power structure.

Fine. We need to go forward. I have no power to lead the UMC forward into the future. But if I had the power, my suggestion would be: Reorganize the church in direction of a federation of self-governing units. Give priority to the ecclesiastic structure of the church in regions so they can be an incarnational church in that region and give up the American praxis and culture of the church, including the "global-church-thinking." Limit the general *Book of Discipline* to the Constitution and a new major part with our history and our Theological Task. Delegate all decisions on organization and guidelines for the work of the church to the annual conferences and the central conferences. Let the central conferences develop their right to adapt and amend the Social Principles. All general agencies are functioning well in America, but organize new agencies in each of the central conferences to work in their own area.

Change the balance of power between the Council of Bishops and General Conference. Elect all bishops for limited terms, and let bishops go back to presbyter status when their term has ended. Change membership rules so that all presbyters and bishops are members of a local church and do not hold church membership in annual conferences or the Council of Bishops. Give the bishops the power of the teaching ministry on doctrinal issues. Give the bishops the power of supervision, not only over pastors and congregations, but also over the *Book of Discipline* and the institutions of the church.

Change the Judicial Council so that this council shall stop being the battleground of conservative and liberal church politicians. Take away the Judicial Council's right to make Declaratory Decisions. Let all issues of constitutionality go back to General Conference. Let

the General Conference work with a consensus method and not the Robert's Rules system, as in the synod of other churches and the WCC.

I think this will bring The United Methodist Church more in harmony with what Wesley understood of conference and the presbyter-episcopacy. And I think it will take The United Methodist Church away from the framework of having the parallel structure of the American administration of the nation, with its strict division of the branches of legislative power, executive power, and judicial power. My vote is for transforming The United Methodist Church in the federal direction and empowering the annual conferences to be more incarnational in their context of culture, politics, and history. I think it would stimulate the mission of the church.

Concerning the whole issue about imperialism and the ecclesiastical structure of the UMC in present time, it is very helpful to use Wesley's agenda from the first Methodist conference: "What do we meet for? To consider before God: 1. What to teach? 2. How to teach? 3. What to do? i.e., doctrine, discipline, and practice."<sup>46</sup> Using this agenda, the conference would focus on the work and mission of the church, and then the ecclesiastical issues as an empiric experience could be left over to the church historians.

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<sup>46</sup> Wesley, John Works Vol 10 *The Methodist Societies. The Minutes of Conference*. Abingdon 2011. p. 120