

The World Wide Nature of the Church – Constitutional Changes Position paper by Bishop Patrick Streiff

Remark: I will use the combined double name "central/regional conference" in this document for what is today called central conference and is proposed to be renamed as regional conference.

Historical point of view:

The idea that the US will become a central/regional conference is not a new thing. The idea has come up several times in the 20th century, first in the 1920'ies, then in the 1960'ies and again in the 1990'ies. Each time, it was linked to a raise in the percentage of central/regional conference delegates to the General Conference to about 20%.

In the 1920'ies and in the 1960'ies, the rise of central/regional conference delegates came to an abrupt downfall by a step towards autonomy in some regions of the world. The rationales in favour of autonomy were mixed, sometimes in order to separate from a US-dominated church, sometimes Methodist churches outside the US were pushed to autonomy by the US-church which thought that autonomy is the better model for the church outside the US.

The discussion since the 1990'ies have led to the decisions of General Conference 2008 which enable the creation of a central/regional conference" for all of the US. The new thing is that General Conference has voted in favour of such a constitutional change for the first time.

Methodist connectional point of view:

It is my deep conviction that we need to remain a connectional church with a world-wide mission. As a historian, I deplore that the world-wide Methodist connectional ties (as developed in the US-branches of Methodism) have been given up in the 1920'ies, more so even in the 1960'ies in favour of an ecumenical ideal which only stresses the unity of the church in one place, but not the unity of the church in the "Ecumene" (which means: "the inhabited world"). The ecumenical ideal of the unity of the church in one place is culturally based on the European State church model.

Background information: Before and after the Reformation, each territory was ruled by an Emperor, King or Prince and had only one single church in all of the territory. After the Reformation, one could exactly say, which territory is Orthodox, which one Catholic, which one Anglican, which one Lutheran, and which one Reformed. There was a unity of the church in one place. The church of each territory had preferential ties to its political ruler. It was a "State church". If one did not want to be part of the church in your territory, the person had to emigrate. This unity of the church in one place was challenged by the "Free churches" which struggled for a separation of church and State and a free choice of the people to which church they want to belong, particularly since the 19th century. The Methodists have always been among this second group, opting for a separation of church and State, and living a connectional structure beyond the borders of a given nation. The ecumenical ideal in the 20th century ("the unity of the church in one place") strove for a unity where there would again be only one single church in a given territory – much as it had been in Europe before the arrival of the "Free churches". If United Methodists have joined in such unions, they could not keep the same close connectional ties within a world-wide UMC.

The constitutional changes of General Conference 2008 will enable to keep the world-wide connectional ties of the UMC. It will not create an Anglican model (where authority lies in the Episcopal office and the world-wide unity is only given through the bond among the bishops), nor a model of a federation of

autonomous churches (as all world federations are whether Lutheran, Reformed or the World Methodist Council). The UMC connectional structure of interrelated levels of conferences (general conference, central/regional conference, annual conference) is unique. We need to preserve it! And the constitutional changes by General Conference 2008 do preserve it.

Structural point of view:

Big institutions which undergo change need to adapt their structure. The UMC undergoes tremendous change by the growth of the church in many parts of the world outside the US. Inevitably, it brings fast change in the composition of General Conference. Predictions say that delegates from outside the US will make up around 40% at General Conference in 2012.

Structurally, general conference delegated part of its power to central/regional conferences. But the latter exist only outside the US. This imbalance has well served us as long as the church outside the US has been a small minority. But as the church outside the US grows rapidly, it becomes problematic for both "sides": Those from outside the US sit in many general conference debates on issues which concern only the US and are difficult to understand for them; those from the US need to accept that delegates from outside the US have a right to vote on all issues which concern only the US (including budget matters!). These inequalities become more and more problematic!

Creating a central/regional conference for the US brings all the regions of the world on a similar structural level. Such a move must be accompanied by a clear mandate about what authority remains exclusively on the level of general conference. The General Conference 2008 was well aware of it and clearly designated which matters need to be in its own authority (and among them controversial issues as the Social Principles). This gives clear guidelines for the process of implementing the constitutional changes.

Of course, many details need to be worked out during this quadrennium. Wisely, General Conference 2008 has given a clear mandate to the study commission on the World Wide Nature of the Church. This mandate is a safeguard that the United Methodist Church remains a connectional body with a world-wide mission and with a general conference that is the unifying bond among its annual conferences in all parts of the world. I am looking forward to the implementation of the decisions of General Conference 2008. They will help us in our world-wide ministry in the 21st century.

February 2009 – Bishop Patrick Streiff, central/regional conference of Central and Southern Europe