

2012 Pre-General Conference Briefing – January 20, 2012  
Response to the Work of the Connectional Table and Interims Operation Team  
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First allow me to commend the hard work of the Connectional Table and the Interim Operations Team. They have not only charted a path for a faithful future for The UMC, but have also guided us through the anxious days of the global recession of the last few years. Certainly one thing we have learned with great clarity is that the world's struggles will not wait for the next General Conference of The UMC, and we must be bold enough to respond in the in between time of our imperfect legislative processes guided by the Holy Spirit. So, thank you brothers and sisters for leading us with courage.

Secondly, I want to affirm that so much of the good work that is before us does not have to wait for the action of the 2012 General Conference. This is not a statement intended to discredit the authority of the General Conference, but rather to say that the recommendations before us are so fundamental to being the Church that they can and should be implemented even now. We are being encouraged to make disciples of Christ, form spiritual leaders, and engage in mission with the fullness of who we are and what we have. This is the work of the Church. In the conference I serve we are working hard to align our hearts, hands, and resources with all of you for the sake of a world transformed through the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus. We are praying for you and ask that you pray for us.

Thirdly, I want to briefly point to some areas of our common work that I believe need continued and careful attention. I share these concerns in the spirit that some have labored in our behalf but now we are all stewards of the work before us. It is the nature of the responsibility given to those of you who have been elected to General Conference to represent United Methodists everywhere. You are now the stewards of the work that has been done thus far.

The first concern I would point to is the need to preserve our connectionalism. I continue to believe that the annual conference is the basic unit of our polity; the best location in our denomination to connect us to do those things we do better together than as individual and separate congregations. Even more, our connectionalism is based on our theological understanding of being members of the body of Christ, and not mere individual congregations functioning independently from each other. Under the present recommendations, annual conferences would be “free to organize for greater fruitfulness.....following similar freedom given to local churches in previous general conferences.”

There is much to be said about being free to respond to the particular context of ministry and mission that a local church or an annual conference find themselves in, but we must not forget the historic responsibility of the annual conference as the basic unit in our structure. Annual conferences are charged with keeping us connected as United Methodists. Paragraph 610.1 of our *Book of Discipline* states, “.....*the annual conference may organize units so long as the functions of ministry are fulfilled and the connectional relationships are maintained.*” The loss of our connectional relationships

would change our long held commitment to being a connectional people, and we will lose our connectional relationships if we do not give great care and oversight to how we exercise responsible freedom within a connectional commitment.

The second concern that burdens my heart is what I continue to experience as an almost disregard for the important function of our general agencies. It is a spirit of disregard that I hear throughout our connection. Several general conferences have struggled with how to align our general agencies to better support our United Methodist mission and ministry. Connectional studies have shown that there is duplication and even competition among our agencies that does not benefit the mission and ministry that God is calling us to be about. Yet general agencies have served a vital function of resourcing the church, and enabling us to act connectionally and we should not lose these important functions. I do not oppose the reduction or reordering of our general agencies, but I am concerned that we have not yet done our best work of aligning the general agencies to a true focus on creating a church that can contribute to the transformation of the world at every place in our connectional church and not just at the local church. There are things that even our strongest local churches cannot do alone and some things they will not do that our general agencies can help us come together to do, and have led us to do in the past. In what seems to be a lack of attention to such matters I see a disregard for the important function of our general agencies.

I do want to affirm that the Connectional Table and the Interim Operations Team have brought us the furthest in our efforts to update our general agencies for greater effectiveness. For this we should be thankful. But, here are some further examples of my concern. Consider the lists of proposed general agency functions. The lists of functions I have seen under the proposed offices of Leadership Excellence, Congregational Vitality, Missional Engagement, and Justice and Reconciliation seem to reflect drop boxes where every thing we have done thus far through general agencies has simply been dropped without obvious thought that is apparent to me to what can be let go of because it may no longer be helpful, nor clear thought to the addition of new things that may be more relevant to the needs of the present age. We must create space for an ongoing and prayerful conversation between our brothers and sisters whom we have asked to lead our general agencies and all of us as to how we will align and redirect the work of our general agencies for fruitfulness and effectiveness.

At the same time there is also legislation that proposes that during the new quadrennium \$60 million would be redirected. If the work of the agencies does not change any more than being placed in different columns, and funding is redirected, I am concerned that we may lay unreasonable expectations on our agencies, crippling their efforts, and that in the process we may also lose some critical functions and ministries that serve the connection and its work that we would not want to lose.

I am also concerned that we have yet to have an in depth connectional conversation about the fact that the present programmatic general agencies were established, with the exception of the General Board of Global Ministries, to serve the U.S. Church. As we have moved into being a more global church there have been growing expectations, and

rightfully so, that our general agencies will serve this global church. Such a shift from U.S. to global, however, requires an intentional change of focus and a sharing of resources that should be done thoughtfully and strategically and not reactively or it will render our general agencies unsustainable.

The third and final concern I would share is the absence of a clear commitment to reaching out to people of color. Friends, in the U.S. a church that does not reach out to people of color is a church that will die. It is both a demographic and a spiritual reality. We still do not seem to see the critical importance to truly open ourselves to people of color. I applaud the inclusion in the proposed governance structure of a highly visible and power connected advisory committee on ministry with young people. A similar advisory committee should be established for ministry with people of color. As chair of the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry I kept asking, “Where will our commitment to people of color be visible in the proposed organizational legislation?” I kept being assured that it would be there. It was not until this fall that I finally saw it, I think. It is at the tail end of the list under the drop box of the Office of Congregational Vitality and its called Multi Cultural Ministries. I do not know what multi cultural ministries means, what work is expected, or what is hoped for. I am unaware of any of our national plans for racial/ethnic ministries being consulted about what would be helpful in reaching out to people of color, but I do know that the Church will be less than faithful if it does not address its inability thus far to make room for people of color in this church, and it will be poorer for it.

Brothers and sisters, I believe that our Connectional Table and Interim Operations Team have brought us thus far. They have done good work, but the task is massive and complex and now it is our turn to take up the task and keep perfecting it. May God be our help.