

**Methodist Federation for Social Action
Presentation to the Study Committee on the
Worldwide Nature of the UMC**

**November 10, 2009
Lake Junaluska, North Carolina**

By Kathryn Johnson, Executive Director

Background

For decades, leaders of the United Methodist Church, at the General Church level, have been seeking solutions to the inequities present in the structure of our denomination. A few of the bodies that have struggled with these issues are: the Commission of Structure of Methodism Overseas (COSMOS); the Committee to Study the Global Nature of the United Methodist Church; the Connectional Process Team; the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church; and, the Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of the UMC.

In addition to these groups others who have weighed in include the Council of Bishops, the General Council on Ministries, the Connectional Table, the members of several General Conferences and the members of Annual Conferences. Most of these bodies have included church leaders from both the UMC in the US and the UMC in Central Conferences in the Philippines, Africa and Europe.

It is clear from the amount of time, energy and resources we have poured into this effort, that the issues involved are both important and not easily resolved!

Indeed, twenty-three of the proposed constitutional amendments that were approved by General Conference 2008, to be voted on by Annual Conferences in 2009, related to this topic. Although not all of the Central Conferences have voted yet on the amendments, it seems clear from the unofficial vote counts taken in US Annual Conferences that none of the amendments related to the structure of the church will pass. Note: The official count on these amendments will be announced by the Council of Bishops at their spring meeting.

*One of the groups that has picked up the task of studying and recommending what needs to happen next is called **The Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of the UMC** (hereafter referred to as the **Study Committee**). I say one of the groups because there are currently several other groups addressing many of the same issues. The groups themselves are working to figure out how to stay in communication and work collegially.*

In September, MFSa received a letter from the Chair of the Study Committee, Bishop Scott Jones, inviting us to attend the Committee's November meeting. He said in his letter that "the questions we must ask and answer are complex, and we seek to listen to a wide range of church leaders early in our process." He continued later in the letter to say, "I write to you as a leader of the Methodist Federation for Social Action to ask if your group would like to make a presentation to the Study Committee so that we might know of any concerns, ideas or possible ramifications of our work that we should consider."

We took them up on this invitation and I went on behalf of MFSa to Lake Junaluska on November 10th. Other groups and agencies invited to make presentations included: Reconciling Ministries Network, Women's Division, Commission on the Status and Role of Women, United Methodist Men, Confessing Movement, Lifewatch, the General Board of Discipleship, Black Methodists for Church Renewal and the General Board of Global Ministries.

Presentation

My name is Kathryn Johnson and I am the Executive Director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action. The Federation, as many of you know, has been part of the Methodist Church for over 100 years, founded at a time of great ferment in U.S. society and indeed, the world. Here in the United States, both the Social Gospel movement and the labor movement were sweeping the country.

The original mission of the Federation was to encourage the Methodist Church, based firmly in our Wesleyan theological tradition, to engage in addressing the ills of society; a society where workers labored 6 or 7 days a week, children were routinely part of the labor force, and the economic inequalities in society led to untold human suffering.

According to the 1908 *Book of Discipline*, MFSA was founded to “to deepen within the church the sense of social obligation and opportunity, to study social problems from the Christian point of view, (and) to promote social service in the spirit of Jesus Christ.” The Federation was endorsed by the 1908 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and recognized by the 1912 General Conference “as the executive agency to rally the forces of the church” to support social service measures. While other protestant denominations responded to the issues of the Social Gospel movement by creating official Social Service Commissions, the Methodist Episcopal Church chose to endorse an unofficial organization. This put the Federation in an unusual position relative to the denomination, at once independent and influential. To this day MFSA remains independent and at times, we like to think, influential.

While MFSA predates our General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), our roles are similar in some respects. Both MFSA and GBCS encourage the church always and everywhere to be engaged in social holiness as well as personal piety.

In addition to encouraging the church, for over a century now, to be about justice in the world, MFSA has played an additional role – that being to seek justice *within* the church. Thus in the early 1900’s when the church was addressing economic inequalities and unjust conditions for workers, MFSA was at the same time looking at wages and working conditions *within* the Methodist Church.

One of the things that the archivists at Drew University showed me when I went to look into MFSA’s history was a large chart that had been carefully and meticulously handwritten in pencil in the year 1912 by someone involved in the MFSA movement. The chart included information about people working in the Methodist Church, particularly those working in an agency that produced Methodist publications. Each worker’s name was written and then information about how much they were paid an hour, how many days a week the person worked, whether the person received any vacation time, whether they were able to take time off when they were sick and the like. I don’t know what happened with that chart but I’m guessing that the information therein made its way into the hands of the board of directors of that agency, if not onto a flyer passed out in front of a board meeting.

Additional examples of our work for justice within the church would include our witness around the Central Jurisdiction. When the church was segregated in this way, MFSA refused to segregate our chapters around the country and worked with those who sought to abolish the Central Jurisdiction. Likewise, when international pressure was being brought to bear on the government of South Africa to end apartheid, MFSA led the movement *within* the United Methodist church to join in this effort by divesting our church funds from South Africa until apartheid had been abolished.

I say all of this by way of explaining the perspective that MFSA brings to the issues before this committee. Historically and currently MFSA looks at such issues both through the lens of the mission and ministry of the church *in the world*, and through the lens of justice *within the church itself*.

It is striking really, that since the 1960's every commission, council, connectional process team and study group has come up with very similar recommendations when it comes to transforming the structure of the UMC.

The reasons for needing to change the structure are clear. The current structure lends itself to many inequities:

- By matter of history, language, resources and location, the governance of the UMC continues to be dominated by the U.S.
- An inordinate amount of time is spent at General Conference dealing with matters that do not directly affect those in regions outside of the U.S.
- Even on the face of it, our structure is odd (some would say flawed) by virtue of the fact that Central Conferences and U.S. Jurisdictions are clearly set up as parallel structures and yet--in some very significant respects-- do not operate in a parallel manner.
- The *United Methodist Book of Discipline* does not apply consistently and uniformly to everyone in the UMC. Those in regions outside of the U.S. are able to adapt much of the *Discipline* within their own cultural context; those in the U.S. are not able to do so.
- Those from the United States have no forum in which to discuss issues that relate specifically to their own region of the world when all others countries have such a forum.

It is clear that we need to create more equity among what we now call the Central Conferences and the U.S. UMC. We need a way for the UMC in the U.S. to gather and address issues within the U.S. context, while at the same time allowing and encouraging continued exchange and mutual ministry through the church at the worldwide level. Thus several of the study committee reports over the years have suggested such things as making the United States a Central Conference, or changing the Central Conferences to Regional Conferences and making the U.S. church one or more regions.

Why is it, that if group after group of representatives from across the church, year after year, come up with very similar recommendations for making changes to our structure, that time after time, either the General Conference itself, or the members of our Annual Conferences reject those proposals? Perhaps, more importantly, is there something we can do differently so that we get another result?

I recently heard someone modify a saying which is familiar to us all. "It's not true," she said, "that if you do what you've always done you'll get what you've always got." What *she* said is "that if you do what you've always done, you'll get *less* than what you've always got." The world continues to change around us and presenting the same or similar proposals to another General Conference, in the way we have in the past, will certainly get us less.

What to do? I have some suggestions:

- 1. Face the problems head on.**
- 2. Be guided by a clear set of principles.**
- 3. Offer a vision.**
- 4. Involve the participation of people across the church.**

Problems need to be identified and faced head on.

When a person or a group (or in our case a denomination) is going to make significant changes, they are doing so in response to a problem or problems. If an individual decides they want to change their weight, usually to lose weight, it is in response to a problem: they are over the weight at which they are comfortable. If a group, say a local church, decides to sell its building, it does so in response to a problem: perhaps they do not feel they are effectively reaching those to whom they are called to minister and thus want to change their location, or perhaps they are unable to pay for the upkeep of their current facility. The first step in making a change is to clearly articulate the problems.

If our denomination is going to make significant changes to its structure, the problems this change will address need to be *clearly* stated. I don't think we always do that very well.

The problems aren't easy – either to resolve or to discuss. Money, power, inequity, varying cultural contexts, a history of colonialism and neo-colonialism. But that's what we have before us, and unless we talk about it frankly, honestly and openly I don't believe we will be able to convey to those at the General Conference level, and certainly not at the Annual Conference level, why it is worth traveling the difficult path of change.

Even though it is beyond the capacity of this Study Committee to resolve the thornier problems we face as a church, I still think that it is essential that the problems, the points of tension, be named.

I would encourage the study committee to name the theological differences that exist in various parts of the church. I would encourage you to name the differences that exist among United Methodists on issues such as sexual orientation and abortion. Leaving these realities unnamed does not make them go away. Naming them up front, I believe, allows us to honestly ask ourselves the question of whether we are going to make proposals about a structure that can contain these differences – or if your intent is to propose the creation of a structure where one theological understanding and one set of beliefs dominates. Again, even if these can't be resolved by this group, name the problems that you are addressing in your proposals.

Second, I believe any proposals for change must be guided by a clear set of principles.

I would hope that this study group will decide upon, and then clearly state, the values or principles that will guide this work and against which any proposals for change can be measured.

The legislation presented to the 2008 General Conference had a section entitled "Basic Guidelines." In essence, most of these were principles. I personally didn't agree with some of them, but if those are the principles chosen, state them and claim them. If not, make clear what principles are being used.

In his book, *A World Parish*, Bruce Robbins suggests a comprehensive set of principles to govern proposed changes. I hope this study committee will take time to consider these and take advantage of the thoughtful and careful work that Bruce has done. [They can be found on page 112 of his book.]

Recently Bruce proposed a more condensed set of principles and included these in legislation that he and Elizabeth Okyama submitted to General Conference 2008.

The principle listed therein that most differs from the principles in the legislation submitted by the predecessor group to this study group is as follows:

Each Regional Conference shall be empowered to permit United Methodists in each region to adopt and effectuate appropriate structures to address the following:

- a) regional and cultural considerations relating to missional activities*
- b) qualifications for ordination*
- c) chargeable offenses, and*

*d) adopting "Social Principles"
appropriate to the region.*

Within the deliberations of this study committee, I've heard this principle suggested in a very direct manner: that the work of the church be done at as local a level as possible.

Clearly people in this room have different opinions about the content of this principle and I'll return to this in a minute. My point here is this: if delegates to General Conference and members of Annual Conferences are going to be asked to adopt proposals coming from this group, I believe it is essential that you articulate, and then communicate with them, the underlying values and principles that have guided your work.

Third, I believe people must be offered a vision.

If people are going to enter into the kind of turmoil that making structural changes in the church will cause, they must be buoyed by a vision that lights up their imaginations and touches their souls. As I read back over the reports from over the years, I am struck by how much of what is being offered has to do with the "hows" of change. Rationales are sometimes given, but I have to admit little catches my imagination and helps me to see how the changes being proposed are going to involve me in creating a church that will truly make a difference in the world as we move into the future.

It's true that the "church needs to be more fully ready for world-wide mission and ministry." It's true that "nations are more interdependent socially, economically, politically and spiritually than ever before." It's true that the "missional witnesses of the disciples of Jesus Christ should be appropriately connected and interdependent."

All of these phrases can be found in the opening paragraphs of the report by the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church. What I don't find is a vision of what that church might look like. If the UMC is making disciples for the transformation of the world – and the changes being proposed are going to help us do that - what is the church going to look like, and what is the world that we create going to look like?

Tell me about how God will pour out the spirit on all flesh: how our sons and daughters shall prophesy and our old men shall dream dreams. Tell me about how young people shall see visions. Tell me about how we are helping to create that world where God's spirit will be poured out on everyone – the menservants and maidservants among them.

Tell me plainly and clearly and honestly about the problems that need to be addressed within our current structure. Propose structural changes that will help us to address those problems. But then paint for me, in broad strokes, a vision of what a transformed church will look like within this new structure and how this transformed church will help to transform the world.

Once you have painted this vision in broad strokes, then hand me, the United Methodist in the pew, the member of Annual Conference, hand me the paint brush and let me participate in creating that vision and figuring out the ways we can change our structure to get there.

And this is my fourth point. Any successful proposal to transform the structure of the church – any proposal that will be accepted and implemented – must involve the participation of people across the church.

Share a vision, propose a structure and then entrust it to the people. Let people across the church read about it, talk about it, disagree with it, and most importantly let them dream about it. Invite them into the vision and let the vision expand to include the gifts that they bring to the table. It is my belief that the proposals to change the structure of the church will come back to you, enriched with the gifts of the people who have added their hopes and dreams.

It is here that I would like to briefly return the content of one of the principles articulated in the Robbins/Okyama legislation with which I know some of you here disagree. This was the principle that

United Methodists in each region of our church be empowered to bring cultural considerations to decisions around missional activities; that each region be empowered to determine qualifications for ordination; that each region be empowered to determine what will constitute chargeable offenses and - this one's the kicker – each region will be empowered to adopt “Social Principles” appropriate to the region.

I have returned to this at this point, as I talk about visions and dreams, partly because my own visions and dreams have changed over the years in relation to this principle. At one point in my journey I would have been rather adamantly opposed to lodging these responsibilities in the regions of the church.

In more recent years I have begun to reflect on whether or not insisting that the authority in these matters be held at the General Church level is not in and of itself rather paternalistic. Whether it isn't somehow based on fear.

The questions that I would offer for reflection are these:

What do we fear might happen if we allow different regions of the church to develop their own guidelines to express their understanding of how they actualize their faith in addressing the social issues of the day? For this is, in fact, what our social principles are – they are guidelines. They are guidelines that change over time; they are guidelines that express our best understanding of how to ground and express our faith in our daily living.

Indeed, I ask myself, is it perhaps paternalistic to assume that people in the various regions of the world cannot do this in a faithful and responsible manner? Why would I think that United Methodist Christians in Africa, or Europe, or the Philippines or the United States wouldn't faithfully take into consideration Scripture, tradition, reason and experience? Why would I think they wouldn't remain faithful to our Wesleyan heritage? Why would I think that these guidelines must be developed at the worldwide level?

Yes, there are clearly global issues to which the worldwide church must speak. But what do we fear would happen, I wonder, if social principles or guidelines were also articulated at a regional level?

The importance of communication

In order for people across the church to fully participate, it will be essential that this study group communicate. The MFSA Board of Directors recently spent two days with a consultant who led us through a very exciting strategic planning process. One of the things she stressed several times was the importance of communication. Communication, she said, is the central point of change management. It is important that your communication is early, intentional, often and constant.

I don't need to belabor the point. Yesterday afternoon I heard Bishop Jones talk about his commitment for this process to be transparent and to communicate as clearly as possible. I guess my only caveat might be to make sure that the communication is broad, and not just to other church leaders and agencies.

Finally, I'd like to briefly address the misinformation that was coming fast and furious just before Annual Conferences last year. There were several videos making their way around cyberspace via YouTube – some produced by conservatives, others by progressives, all encouraging people to vote one way or another on the constitutional amendments. The narrator on a video that MFSA found quite troubling would have one believe that MFSA, and other groups on the progressive end of the spectrum, have one goal and one goal only when it comes to the church and anything that happens within the church: that goal being to hasten the day when lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons are fully accepted as members and clergypersons within our denomination - a day when one's sexual orientation is understood as a good gift from God and is fully affirmed by the church.

The narrator of the video talks about the hidden agenda of what he calls “radical gay advocacy” groups. He avers that these groups, and I assume he is including MFSA in that number, took the stands we did on the constitutional amendments because of this secret agenda.

The first thing I would like to say in response, is that there is nothing secret about where MFSA stands on the human rights and the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the life of the United Methodist Church. We have agonized for decades over what we understand as the grievous harm done by the church in excluding LGBT persons. And we have taken every action we can think of to hasten the day when the church will change.

Let me also make clear however, that MFSA members are United Methodist Christians who serve God and love the church. Our beliefs and our actions grow out of our commitment to follow Jesus, to seek justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

Yes, we carry in our hearts, always, the grief that stems from the actions of exclusion practiced by our church. But how small would be our God, how meager our faith, if we did not hold in those same hearts, the desire for the well-being and inclusion of *all*. Yes, we want a church where LGBT persons are accepted and affirmed....

And....

We want a church that is a witness for peace in a world torn by war...

We want a church where young and old feel that their voices matter and that their lives are cherished...

We want a church where the Liberian United Methodist and the United Methodist from Boston can break bread together and enrich one another's lives by sharing their faith journeys...

We want a church where the structures that surround us -- local churches, annual conferences, jurisdictions, regional conferences, general conference -- where these structures are designed so that no one region of the church dominates another, where all regions of the church share of their resources as they are able, where cultural context *does* impact the decisions made by the Body of Christ as it is manifest in the lives of people in various regions -- whether that be in Uganda or Sacramento.

Our vision for the church includes worldwide gatherings of United Methodists where we learn from one another, celebrate our common heritage, worship together, speak with one voice on global issues where we are in accord, and challenge one another where we are not. A church where we gather by regions to discern the ways in which our own cultural contexts guide the ways in which we are called to embody the Gospel. A church where we gather by local church, district and annual conference to support and uphold one another in these ministries.

I look forward to following the work of the Study Committee and to hearing your visions and dreams of how we can best be in the church in this day and in this age.

Thank you again for inviting me to share my reflections.

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