

## GLOBAL CHURCH STRUCTURE

## OPTIONS

Three distinct proposals are being brought for consideration of the 2008 General Conference regarding the worldwide restructuring of the Church.

- The first, brought by the Connectional Table and the Council of Bishops under the name **Scott Jones**, consists of 23 petitions to amend the Constitution and one non-disciplinary petition calling for a quadrennial study to arrive at implementing legislation for 2012 (heretofore referred to collectively as the “Jones proposal”).
- The second, submitted by **Bruce Robbins and Elizabeth Okayama**, consists of a non-disciplinary petition that calls for the appointment of a quadrennial **Task Group on Structure** to bring proposals for equitable change to the 2012 General Conference according to specific principles in the petition (the “Robbins/Okayama/Okayama proposal”).
- The third, from **Frank Wulf**, consists of 12 petitions to amend the Constitution in ways generally consistent with the Robbins/Okayama proposal. (the “Wulf proposal”).

## ISSUE

The Jones proposal amends the Constitution to change the name “central conference” to “regional conference” and opens the door for a future General Conference to establish the U.S. as a regional conference. This proposal has no impact on existing jurisdictions within the U.S. but would allow for the establishment of a middle level body called a regional conference between the General and Jurisdictional Conferences. While the constitutional amendments in the Jones proposal could allow the formation of more than one regional conference within the United States, the adoption of its enabling resolution would limit further study to the creation of just one regional conference for all of the United States.

The Robbins/Okayama proposal calls for four years of study to develop an equitable structure that:

- 1) does not allow one region to dominate any other,
- 2) enables all regions to contribute in an equitable way to the Church’s apportioned funds, and
- 3) empowers each region both to effectuate structures appropriate to cultural considerations related to missional activities, qualifications for ordination, and chargeable offenses, and to adopt “Social Principles” appropriate to the region.

The Wulf proposal, by contrast, puts the U.S. jurisdictional conferences on a par with the central conferences, designates all of them by the name “regional conference,” and provides them all

with the same powers and responsibilities. Putting jurisdictions and central conferences on equal footing is natural since both presently have many similar powers and responsibilities including the election of bishops. (The major differences at present between jurisdictional and central conferences are that central conferences are outside the U.S and may amend the *Discipline* while jurisdictions are inside the U.S. and may not amend the *Discipline*.) Moreover, the Wulf proposal, in contrast to the Jones and Robbins/Okayama proposals, does not call for a period of study and would, therefore, allow for a change in the structure of the U.S. Church as soon as the Council of Bishops declare the constitutional amendments have passed.

Both the Jones and the Wulf proposals involve amending several sections of the Constitution. Because of this, both would require the General Conference to pass a series of petitions by a two-thirds vote. Because the Robbins/Okayama proposal does not involve changing the Constitution at this time, it could be adopted by a majority vote.

## ANALYSIS

Three primary issues need to be considered in assessing the relative merits of the three proposals: 1) equity between the Church in the United States and outside the United States, 2) the autonomy of regions, and 3) the time frame for actual change.

**Equity:** The Jones proposal to change the name central conference to regional conference is a long overdue step to correct the historical imperialism that has characterized relationships between the Church in the U.S. and the Church outside the U.S. The establishment of the U.S. as a regional conference – if it occurs – will do much to correct the perception that the UMC is a U.S. Church with outposts on other continents and allow the UMC to operate in such a way that regions outside the U.S. are treated as full partners. However, the establishment of the U.S. as a regional conference will do little to correct real imbalances in power and resources. The fact that the bulk of resources will continue to reside in the U.S. regional conference will hinder efforts at authentic power sharing. In addition, unlike any of the other regional conferences, the U.S. regional conference would include jurisdictions that retain all of their existing powers including the power to elect bishops. So the U.S. regional conference might best be called a “super-regional” conference because it would be different from all the other regional conferences.

The Robbins/Okayama proposal specifically mandates a *Task Group on Structure* to look at ways to create equity in which one region does not dominate the others. The exact form this equity might take in actual structure cannot be mandated until the *Task Group* has done its work, though it is clear that the U.S. cannot remain as one regional conference in an equitable structure. The proposal to create a structure in which all regions contribute to the apportioned funds of the church based on regional differences and as appropriate to the availability of resources helps to ensure that a relationship of dominance and subservience rooted in the roles of giving and receiving will be avoided.

The Wulf proposal eliminates the possibility of a mid-level U.S. regional conference by establishing each of the five U.S. jurisdictions as a regional conference in its own right. Under this proposal, the power of the U.S. Church would be effectively curbed by dividing it into five parts. No one part would be large enough to dominate all the others, thus opening the door to a

more equitable sharing of power with regions around the world. The Wulf proposal could be strengthened concerning the equity principle by incorporating into it elements of the Robbins/Okayama proposal related to the responsibilities of all regions to contribute to the Church's apportioned funds.

**Autonomy:** The Jones proposal does not address the issue of whether the regional conferences will keep the flexibility that the existing central conferences now have to adapt the *Discipline* to meet conditions in their own areas. On the one hand, the Jones proposal leaves unchanged the constitutional provisions granting central conferences the right to "make such rules and regulations for the administration of the work within their boundaries including such changes and adaptations of the General Discipline as the conditions in the respective areas may require." (Paragraph 31.5) This power is limited by the constitutional powers given to the General Conference. If the General Conference did not propose further constitutional changes, the power to modify the *Discipline* would apply equally to all regional conferences so the U.S. Church would have the same rights if it were a regional conference.

On the other hand, the Jones proposal muddies the water with its study proposal that includes provisions that would legislatively limit the right of regional conferences to modify the *Discipline*. For instance, the Jones proposal seeks to prevent regional conferences from adapting the Social Principles. The extent to which the General Conference may legislatively limit the constitutional rights of regional conferences is untested territory and would probably need to be resolved by the Judicial Council. On the face of it, if the Jones principles in petition 24 were implemented as is, regional conferences would be deprived of essential autonomy.

The Wulf proposal would extend to each of the five U.S. regional conferences the same right to adapt the Discipline as is currently granted the central conferences. Since the Wulf proposal does not seek to legislatively define the meaning of the present constitutional provisions, this right would remain unchanged. Still, it would continue to be limited by the constitutional prerogatives vested in the General Conference under paragraph 16 to establish some rules and practices that are equally binding on all regions of the Church.

The Robbins/Okayama proposal builds upon the Wulf proposal by specifically granting the regions the power to "adopt and effectuate structures that address regional and cultural considerations relating to missional activities, qualifications for ordination, and chargeable offenses." Each region would also be specifically empowered to adopt a version of the Social Principles appropriate to itself. This proposal would, for example, allow different regions to adopt educational requirements for ordination in concert with the needs, expectations and available resources in a given region. In order to clearly exempt this proposal from any limitations by powers reserved to the General Conference under paragraph 16, the Constitution would need to be amended to include its provisions.

The Wulf proposal could be strengthened by using the language of the Robbins proposal to clarify that all regional conferences in the U.S. and beyond would have power to make different decisions concerning missional activities, qualifications for ordination, and chargeable offenses and to adopt Social Principles appropriate to the region.

Another important area of autonomy is the ability of existing regional conferences to have input about boundary changes. The Jones proposal allows the General Conference to change the boundaries of existing regional conferences without consultation or consent. The Wulf proposal only allows the General Conference to change the boundaries of an existing regional conference when it has the consent of the majority of the annual conferences of each regional conference involved in the boundary change.

**Time Frame:** The Jones proposal does not mandate that the U.S. Church would become a regional conference on a par with other regional conferences around the world in 2008. It only makes constitutional changes necessary for doing so at a future time. It would therefore give the Connectional Table and the Council of Bishops an additional quadrennium to study what legislation is required to establish one U.S. regional conference and to propose a specific plan for doing so. The earliest that these proposals could take effect would be 2012. This would mean that the Church would continue to operate for the next four years with essentially the same structure it currently has. Only the names would change.

The Robbins/Okayama proposal, like the Jones proposal, calls for a quadrennial study to arrive at legislation consistent with the equity and autonomy principles in the Robbins/Okayama resolution. The earliest any substantial change might occur would be 2012 based on the findings and proposals brought to the General Conference by the Task Force on Structure. Moreover, any changes that require amending the Constitution – such as creating a system of regional conferences – could not take effect until the Council of Bishops declares that any proposed constitutional amendments have passed.

The Wulf proposal is the only one of the three to call for immediate change. It takes effect as soon as the Council of Bishops declares that the proposed constitutional amendments have passed. It would therefore allow for the Church to expedite long overdue changes that would create greater equity within the worldwide church and allow for greater local autonomy.

## **RECOMMENDED ACTION**

**MFSA commends the intent of the work of the Connectional Table and Council of Bishops in bringing before the church critical issues related to the worldwide structure of our denomination, issues that have tremendous importance for the Church's future. We believe that the expression of that intent is most fully accomplished in *one* of the following two courses of action.**

**1. Should the General Conference choose to spend additional time reflecting upon the most equitable way to move toward creating effective regional conferences with appropriate autonomy, we recommend adopting the Robbins/Okayama proposal, establishing a *Task Group on Structure* and taking further action in 2012 in accord with the three Robbins/Okayama principles. This action has the benefit of addressing the key issues of equity and autonomy while involving the larger church in the discussion of how best to determine how to designate the “regions” of the church.**

-or-

**2. Should the General Conference choose to act now to institute these important changes for increased equity and autonomy we recommend that the General Conference**

a) amend the Wulf proposal by adding a proposal for GCFA to conduct a quadrennial study of the giving patterns of the different regions of the worldwide Church and to return proposals for an equitable distribution of apportionments based on regional differences and as appropriate to the availability of resources across all regions of the Church to the 2012 General Conference.

b) amend the proposed constitutional amendment from Wulf to ¶ 27. Article V. Subparagraph 5. so that it reads as follows:

5. To make rules and regulations for the administration of the work of the Church within the ~~jurisdiction~~ *region including such changes and adaptations of the General Discipline as the conditions in the respective areas may require* **region that are based on regional and cultural considerations relating to missional activities, qualifications for ordination, and chargeable offenses, and to adopt “Social Principles” appropriate to the region**, subject to such powers as have been or shall be vested in the General Conference.

c) Move the adoption of the Wulf proposal as amended by the Legislative Section and the General Conference.

This course of action has the advantage of moving us forward now rather than waiting for another quadrennium for fundamental change to take place.