

The Conferences

Episcopacy guarantees leadership & administration continuity; conference system guarantees basic democratic process. Personnel decisions in the hands of the episcopacy; almost all policy decisions are in the hands of the conferences (General, jurisdictional or central, annual, district, and charge).

The General Conference, the “Congress” of United Methodism

Congress and General Conference both are legislative bodies with elected representatives. Congress is national but General Conference is international. General conference delegates are more serious about their tasks than congressional reps because General Conference delegates have only ten days to do all their work. Also, all volunteer!

Yes, there are naturally politics at General Conference in the sense that delegates, bishops, agency executives, and other concerned people are doing what they can to convince and persuade other delegates on issues about which they have deep convictions. Politics in the sense of bartering and trading votes is *not* a part of the General Conference scene—too little time for politics as it is practiced in Congress and more importantly, the delegates regard their votes as matters of sacred responsibility, not to be traded away for political gain.

General conference meets every four years in April or May. Composed of 600 to 1000 delegates, half clergy, half lay. Delegates elected by their annual conferences. Number determined by two factors: number of clergy and number of church members in the annual conference. Executive heads of all boards and agencies of the Church have voice on the floor in regards to matters affecting interest but no vote. Affiliated autonomous Methodist churches have similar privilege.

Bishops have no voice or vote in the General Conference. They are present and one of their number serves as presiding officer. Committee on Presiding Officers, made of lay and clergy delegates, decides which bishops will preside. Secretary of General Conference is the only permanent officer but this is not a full-time position. Secretary is elected by General Conference. There is a quorum requirement of a majority of delegates must be present for business to be done.

Any organization, clergyperson, or layperson of The United Methodist Church to submit a petition to the General Conference. *Thousands* of petitions are received by each General Conference! All petitions must be dealt with by the legislative committees (usually broken up into sub-committees, even sub-sub-committees) and eventually by the General Conference.

Only the General Conference can speak officially for The United Methodist Church. All other groups can only speak for themselves and should make this clear when they do speak.

Organization and Affiliation Outside the United States

The UMC began as strictly as an US church. With the missionary movement of the 19th century, it became international. Annual conferences overseas were presided over by

American bishops. Development of central conferences to provide more effective indigenous episcopal leadership. Central conference made of equal number of lay and clergy from the annual conferences in that country. It meets every four years with a principle duty of electing bishops. Central conference sets the tenure for its own bishops (not all life-time tenures). Can adapt disciplinary procedures to the conditions of the area as long as they don't violate the Constitution or the General Rules.

Growth of nationalism and desire for independence led many portions of the Church to become affiliated autonomous churches using the procedures given in the *Discipline*. They can send non-voting delegates to the General Conference and they do have the right to transfer members & clergy between the churches. More recently there are reassessments of the value of being integral part of the worldwide structure. Now procedures for autonomous churches to become a part of the UMC.

The Jurisdictional Conference

Principle of regionalism is the only reason for the jurisdictional conferences. Regions of the conference differ politically, sociologically, and in their church life, so they should have the chance to plan their programs and elect their bishops in the light of their own needs. But is it parochialism? Bishops are “general superintendents”, bishops of the whole Church, so shouldn't they be elected by the whole Church? The argument for a more democratic participation in the election of a bishop wins out, since the jurisdictional system does provide for a wider and more direct participation in the selection of leadership by those over whom the leader will serve. Election at the General Conference would be too unwieldy and too far removed from the people directly concerned. Election at the annual conference would promote parochialism. Jurisdictional conference is the best balance.

The Annual Conference

General Conference ⇔ Congress; annual conference ⇔ state legislature. Annual conference is the basic body in the Church. Right to:

- Vote on all constitutional amendments (full-connection clergy & lay)
- Elect delegates to the General Conference (full-connection clergy elect clergy delegates and lay elect lay delegates)
- Determine all matters of ordination, character, and conference relations of clergy (full-connection clergy only).

Membership composed of clergy (full connection, probationary, associate, full- and part-time local pastors under appointment) and lay. Members by virtue of office: conference presidents of UMW & UMM, conference lay leader, president of youth organization, chair of conference young adult organization, chair of conference college student organization, one person between 12-17 and another between 18-30 from each district, plus enough extra lay members to keep the overall lay number = clergy number by whatever plan the annual conference chooses. Lay missionaries of the Church and representatives from other denominations can have a seat and privilege of the floor but no vote at the annual conference.

Bishop sets date but annual conference or committee sets the location. Special sessions may be called by either the annual conference in consultation with the bishop or by the

bishop if three-fourths of the superintendents agree. Special session can act only on the matters specified in the call.

Annual conference can adopt rules and regulations that are not in conflict with the *Discipline*, e.g., stricter rules for clergy membership than in *Discipline* but not lesser requirements. The conference can inquire into financial deficits and membership problems of local churches and can require the pastor and lay members to appear before an appropriate committee to discuss the matter.

Conference business consists largely of hearing reports and acting on recommendations of various boards & agencies, election of personnel to various boards & agencies, and adoption of conference budgets for the year. Various recommendations & petitions from lay, clergy, local churches, boards & agencies are voted upon. Reading of appointments throughout the week with laying on of hands by those around. Great worship services!

Conference agencies mandated by *Discipline*: council on finance and administration, commission on equitable compensation, council on ministries or equivalent, board of higher education and campus ministry, board of ordained ministry, committee on episcopacy, board of pensions and health benefits, commission on archives and history, commission on Christian unity and interreligious concerns, commission on religion and race, commission on the status and role of women, joint committee on disability, board of laity, and committee on investigation. Also general boards of church and society, discipleship, and global ministries may be organized at the annual conference level or their functions must be assigned to alternate conference body. Three mandatory district structures: district committee on ordained ministry, committee on district superintendency, and board of church location and building.

Board of Ordained Ministry

Board of ordained ministry (BOM) is concerned with the clergypersons of the conference from the time a young person may first exhibit interest in the ministry until retirement and beyond. BOM made of clergy in full connection and lay with laity making up between 1/5 to 1/3 of the board and they have full voting rights. While conference nominating committee nominates members of all other boards and agencies, the bishop in consultation with the outgoing chair of BOM from the previous quadrennium and the cabinet nominates the members of BOM. This provides an indirect but important way to influence the whole area of ministerial relationships.

Responsibilities of BOM: recruiting persons for the ministry; screening and testing candidates at all levels of progress; administering scholarships; developing continuing-education programs; providing resources to help clergy deal with problems of the ministry; interviewing/recommending all clergy who are seeking to leave the ministry or another relationship, including retirement; plus other duties the annual conference may place on it.

BOM assisted by district committee on ordained ministry (COM). It is made up of a rep from BOM; six ordained ministers in full connection of the district (nominated by DS in consultation with chair of BOM), three lay, and DS. COM selects its own officers from the committee. COM interviews and certifies candidates for ordained ministry and also make recommendations to BOM on several other matters of clerical status.

Provisional Annual Conferences, Missionary Conferences, Missions, and District Conferences

Annual conference must have at least 50 clergy members in full connection to be and continue as an annual conference but sometimes a structure like an annual conference with smaller numbers is needed. **Provisional annual conference** for 10+ clergy; usually takes place on a mission field where the growth in the scope of work warrants it. Has most of the powers of a regular annual conference. Must have at least 6 clergy to continue.

Missionary conference also organized in same manner as annual conference but because of limited personnel and resources, requires substantial aid and administrative guidance from General Board of Global Ministries. Clergy person is member of an annual conference and an affiliate member of the missionary conference. Alaska is a missionary conference now associated with the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference (used to be associated with Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference).

Mission functions more like a district conference. Clergy serving in the mission continue to hold conference membership back home in an annual conference from which they receive appointments as missionaries. General Board of Global Ministries is deeply involved in administration and support of missions, but the bishop in charge appoints the superintendent and preachers to their charges.

District conference not widely used. Optional structure in some annual conferences that can vote on issuing certificates of candidacy for the ministry on recommendation of the COM.

Charge Conference

Last in the chain of conferences that are a guarantee of the democratic process in United Methodism at all levels. Every member of the local church has a vote at the church conference and helps elect one or more lay members to the annual conference. Lay members vote in election of lay delegates to the jurisdictional and General conferences. On the clergy side, no person can become a member without receiving a recommendation from his or her local charge conference or church conference. Thus the local church members influence who the future clergy members of the annual conference and in turn jurisdictional and General conference will be.

The conference system is the best means we've come up with so far for a practical, efficient and democratic means for the basic governance of our Church.