

REFORM LEGISLATION: BAD MEDICINE, OR JUST BAD TASTING?

A Commentary by Jay Brim, Lay Leader of the Southwest Texas Annual Conference

Tim McClendon's recent column about the reform petition he and I spent so much time editing in August of this year raises excellent issues for the Church to contemplate before we legislate next spring. Choosing just one issue to pick on is difficult, but as a lay leader in the Church I gravitated immediately to the polity issue he highlights: the tense balance between our episcopal system of leadership and our conferences.

Several people have mentioned to me that the UMC's balance of powers actually reflects the American constitutional system of legislative (General, Annual, and Jurisdictional conferences), executive (Council of Bishops and general agencies), and judicial (Judicial Council) branches, and that certainly is accurate; however, I think Tim's point (if he will forgive the interpretation) is aimed more at the ecclesiastical issue of episcopal authority versus the "civil" authority of our conferences, made up as they are by memberships of one-half clergy and one-half laity. The traditional Catholic/Anglican system has been significantly tempered over the years by our choice of representational governing of the Church, and that has often been the subject of debate at General Conference.

The IOT recommendations affirmed by the CT and converted into legislation by our team do not alter that balance of power whatsoever. We have proposed a realigned general church staff governance structure that will minimize the conflicts that all of us working at the general church level over the past generation have witnessed repeatedly—arguments between staff leadership and their boards with boards and staff of other agencies over funding and portfolio mandates, played out through lengthy petitions passed late at night at General Conference to the chagrin of one or another of the players. A significant percentage of delegates elected to General Conference have been directors of agencies (in the interest of full disclosure, I acknowledge that I have been one since 1996) and plead guilty to the charge). We all have become lobbyists for our boards each quadrennium to one extent or another, passing petitions and adding language to the *Book of Discipline*; we have done our jobs so well that the number of words in the BOD has increased from about 200,000 in 1972 to around 300,000 in 2008.

The issue Tim raised is nevertheless very significant. The Council of Bishops has proposed that the UMC approve the "setting aside" of one of its number (and own choosing) each quadrennium to carry the administrative load for the Council. Just being President of the COB has become too much for a bishop in residency in an area, they say, and the efficacy of the argument is clear if you speak to a bishop who has served in that capacity. Furthermore, they say, having the set-aside bishop work to align the efforts of the leadership of the Church to the "adaptive challenge" facing us—creating and maintaining *vital* local churches—is an important step forward for us in reversing the decline of the Church.

Episcopal authority is part and parcel of who we are as progeny of the Anglican and Roman Catholic movements. But perhaps more significant for us as Wesleyans, we as a denomination

have adopted a more democratic and participatory form of governance including the modern turns democratic systems of government have taken. Central to those modern changes has been the institution of the 50/50 clergy/lay voting pattern in all our conferences. I believe that system is now a part of our DNA as a denomination, and that the true tension in our governance is between that voting system and stronger episcopal leadership. We must decide how we wish to implement the decisions made in our conferences, and for two centuries we have relied on our bishops to lead us in carrying out those decisions.

Again, this is a practical argument only. Rev. McClendon has accurately cited the various Judicial Council decisions about where our Constitution places authority for decision-making, and I am not quibbling with him on that point. What I believe is drawing fire in the IOT/CT proposals is the taking away of so many positions on boards of agencies, with the consequent loss of opportunity for over 500 clergy and laity to participate in the decision-making. That is what will happen if the proposal is adopted, but the blow to a few egos (relatively speaking) is not as important as how a streamlined system will improve the efficiency and performance of the general church in carrying out our mission. The proposal as filed requires that the membership of both the 15-member and the 45-member boards be diverse and inclusive, a cardinal (pardon the pun) rule for United Methodists.

Is the time of episcopal leadership past? I think not. We need our best and brightest clergy consecrated to leading the spiritual and temporal affairs of this denomination, and we need to make the job doable for those we choose for the position. We also need to consider whether we are giving them useful tools for the job while tying their hands with the many roadblocks to centralized authority we have erected over the years. We can have strong episcopal leadership while preserving our democratic decision-making if we pay attention to what is ahead of us next spring. We need to look to the future while not forgetting the past. Mr. Wesley would want it that way.



Jay Brim is a member of the Connectional Table and the chair of its Legislative Task Force. He headed up work to draft the Call to Action legislative petitions to the 2012 General Conference. He is currently the lay leader of the Southwest Texas Annual Conference, and the first-elected lay person from the Conference for the 2012 General Conference.