

Plans under way to make Discipline truly global

By Heather Hahn

Feb. 16, 2015 | MAPUTO, Mozambique (UMNS)

What are the essentials that bind all United Methodists and what can be adapted for use outside the United States?

That is the heart of the debate before an international body of church leaders, who met this past week in Maputo, Mozambique.

General Conference, the denomination's top lawmaking body, in 2012 assigned the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters to assist in developing a truly global Book of Discipline. The hope is that such a book, which will contain the church's teachings and rules of governance, will help the denomination live more fully into its worldwide nature.

The central conferences are seven church regions in Africa, Europe and the Philippines. Like their U.S. counterparts — the five jurisdictions — central conferences encompass groups of annual conferences and oversee the elections of bishops.

But unlike U.S. jurisdictions, central conferences have authority under the denomination's constitution to make "such changes and adaptations" to the Book of Discipline as missional needs and differing legal contexts require.

"Many parts of the Book of Discipline are not applicable to churches that serve in manifold ways in different nations, different languages, under different state constitutions and legal systems," said the Rev. Wilfried Nausner, a standing committee member and district superintendent of United Methodists in Macedonia and Albania.

This has led to a sort of "shadow legislation," not in the Discipline, that United Methodists in various countries have developed to organize their work and ministry, he said.

The standing committee, in consultation with the Committee on Faith and Order, must recommend to General Conference which portions of the Book of Discipline are not subject to adaptation.

"In order to support the answer to God's call, it is essential that we remain mindful of the missional focus of making disciples wherever our brothers and sisters find themselves," Nausner said.

He and other committee members gave an update Feb. 9 on their work at a joint meeting with the Connectional Table, which coordinates general church ministry and resources. It was the first time the two bodies had ever met together.

The standing committee's mandate

The standing committee has 39 members — three from each jurisdiction and central conference, as well as three representatives from the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, the denomination's mission agency. It is the only denomination-wide body in which people who live outside the United States are the majority.

Specifically, the standing committee is to assess the Book of Discipline's Part VI, Organization and Administration, which contains the chapters most directly related to organizing ministry in the central conferences.

Ultimately, committee members hope the 2020 General Conference will approve what it calls a General Discipline, with a worldwide outlook and possibly a lot fewer paragraphs.

First, the committee wants feedback from other United Methodists — especially the 2016 General Conference — to find out whether it's on the right track.

A draft of a proposed, slimmed-down version of Part VI will be available for the delegates in Portland, Oregon, to review. But the committee is not asking the assembly to make such a significant revision just yet.

The committee's only legislative proposal related to the global Book of Discipline for 2016 mainly asks for an extension through 2020 to continue work on the revision.

Committee members said they want more feedback and need more time to examine and possibly pare down chapters dealing with the work of general agencies and the denomination's judicial processes.

But it should be noted the committee is not considering any changes related to the denomination's much-debated teachings on homosexuality. The judicial processes chapter includes the list of chargeable offenses under church law, which for clergy includes officiating at same-sex unions or being a "self-avowed practicing homosexual."

What central conferences are adapting

Bishops from the central conferences told United Methodist News Service that the adaptations their areas make often are to accommodate the vagaries of different languages and the requirements of different property laws.

One way in which central conferences can significantly differ from the United States is ordination requirements for elders.

Bishop Francisco Ciriaco Q. Francisco, who leads the Davao Area in the Philippines, said his area has developed an alternative course of study to be used among indigenous people who live in remote areas and can't afford the time and money to get a traditional seminary education.

Central Congo Area Bishop David Kekumba Yemba, likewise, said his area has to adapt the education requirements for clergy.

Going slow

Initially, the committee had discussed proposing in 2016 both revisions to Part VI and other changes to shift the denomination toward no longer seeing the United States as default expression of United Methodism. But over three days of meetings, the committee members concluded it was best to go slow, gather more input and make the process as transparent as possible.

"That is so the church can come with us," Bishop Patrick Streiff, the standing committee's chair, told UMNS. He also leads the Central and Southern Europe Area.

"There is an African saying: 'If you want to be fast, go alone.' If you want to go together and have everyone with you, you need to go slower."

After the 2016 General Conference, the committee plans to ask each United Methodist annual conference to respond by August 2018 to the following questions about the committee's revised Part VI:

- What parts do you miss?
- What is too detailed?
- What inconsistencies do you see?

What about the United States?

Whatever disciplinary paragraphs it deems adaptable for central conferences, the committee at this point is suggesting could be moved to a newly created Part VII.

If that happens, Nordic and Baltic Area Bishop Christian Alsted said he could envision a successful push to give the U.S. jurisdictions the authority to adapt that part as well. But that is not within the standing committee's current purview, he and other committee members said.

The Rev. Kimberly D. Reisman, also a standing committee member, said that, for now, the committee is concentrating on building trust.

"If we try to do too much, too soon, then we will undermine the trust that is needed to move forward," she said. "Our actions may open up the conversation (about what the changes mean

for U.S. United Methodists) — and we hope they will — but if we move too quickly, then the conversation will come to a complete halt.”

Streiff hopes that one outcome of the committee’s years of work will be a more stable Book of Discipline that will invite fewer legislative revisions each General Conference.

“If we are right about the essentials,” he said, “they do not need to be changed every four years.”

Hahn is a multimedia news reporter for United Methodist News Service. Contact her at (615) 742-5470 or newsdesk@umcom.org.

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What about the name ‘central conference?’

Early on, the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters considered submitting constitutional amendments to replace the name “central conferences” with “regional conferences.”

The hope was to clear up any confusion with the similarly named, racially segregated Central Jurisdiction in the United States. The jurisdiction was created in 1939 with the merger of southern and northern Methodists, and it was abolished in 1968 with the merger that created The United Methodist Church.

But the standing committee soon realized such a change would prove problematic in French-speaking countries, which already apply the term “region” to episcopal areas. “Area is a term that doesn’t translate; it doesn’t say anything in French,” said Bishop Patrick Streiff, the standing committee’s chair.

“We will bring no constitutional changes,” he said.

He also noted that the term “central conference” predates the Central Jurisdiction or any U.S. jurisdictions. The first central conference started in the 1880s when the two annual conferences in India recognized they only had contact with the United States, not with each other. The annual conferences created a central conference as a place where they could centralize their work together.

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