

Report to the 2021 Western Jurisdictional Conference

Workgroup Two Workgroup on Role of the Episcopacy

Team

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Purpose

To provide insight and offer information to the WJ delegates for use over the next 2 years as they navigate the movement of their ACs and the wider General Church, and specifically, the Western Jurisdiction.

Process

This team created three sub-groups to target specific areas of research: a Scenarios/Modeling group, a Theological/Scriptural grounding group, and a Deep Listening group. Each group created a prophetic offering based on their collective wisdom, scriptural groundings, and feedback from clergy and laity in the Western Jurisdiction.

Learnings

There are many components and much complexity when one speaks of the United Methodist episcopacy. When you add on the identity of the Western Jurisdiction to the episcopal discussion, it further adds an additional layer of complexity. We will not be able to provide any definitive conclusions, but we hope to spark a generative dialogue and provide a context for innovative ideas that will emerge from our Western Jurisdiction constituency.

From our general surveys of Western Jurisdiction members, we asked the question of “What is the most important episcopal role in your opinion?” The majority responses revolved around leadership, and especially spiritual leadership. From this core, issues such as vision, accountability, appointment making, and oversight emerged. Also prominent were issues of relationship: shepherding, caring, and love. There seems to be an embracing of the dichotomy of strong leadership skills with the need for personal relationship building, or personal touch.

One of the more interesting concepts from our surveys was the system’s need to create a workflow/function/role in the WJ College of Bishops based on their skills and passions, not a system where each Bishop does all the things. Collaboration in the very broad sense was mentioned a number of times.

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As we look at new models of the WJ Episcopacy, we invite fresh thinking about the role of bishop that fundamentally declutters the job and affirms a deeper calling for the role. Superintendents and conference leadership can be cultivated into a role that is oriented toward growth as opposed to maintenance, enhanced collaboration among congregations and other denominations' leadership, critical networking toward inclusion, and resourcing congregations into new relevant forms.

In this realignment, bishops can more fully be pastors to pastors, empowerees of a shared vision, prophetic voices to the world, and stewards of ecumenical and interfaith relationships.

At the moment of consecration, the individuals elected to Episcopal Office, take a vow...

“To guard the faith, seek the unity of the whole church, and enforce the Book of Discipline.”

But we found ourselves wondering if the scale has tipped whereby the Book of Discipline carries within it an anxiety within the system of the United Methodist Church. Anxious systems sometimes over-structure. Minute detail takes the place of trust and relationship among the members. When conflict arises in the body of the church, the tendency is to go to the book, not to each other for discernment and reconciliation

As per their vow, bishops are stewards of the Book of Discipline. When we reviewed the vow of bishops at the time of their consecration, we were concerned that in the context of the current legalism that has permeated our denomination, those very words could be expected to silence the prophetic voice for change and reinforce the power of office to protect the status quo. We want bishops who are free to speak truth as an expression of their commitment to the Book of Discipline. It is a tragic day, when a document, which should serve as a source of order and spiritual guidance for a discerning church, is used as a means of conformity instead of as a tool for calling people together for deeper understanding.

Coupled with this current trend, the episcopacy has evolved into a very colonial and corporate structure of leadership, which in many ways emphasizes the administrative functions. As we look at the future of the episcopacy in the Western Jurisdiction, these themes have emerged as possible alternatives: Emphasis on the teaching and prophetic functions of the office of Bishop, a return to the spiritual and pastoral role and a yearning for an authentic relationship, and finally, a collaborative partnership between the Bishop and the churches, laity and clergy of any assignment.

Remaining Questions

- As UMC finances dwindle and bishops are assigned larger territories, how is it possible to provide personal relationships with so many churches and members? The organizational principle is that the larger the constituency, the farther away the head of the organization is to one-on-one contacts.
- Our UMC polity has always stressed the fact that UMC bishops are bishops to the whole church, and not to any diocesan region. How do we reconcile the call for bishops to be more localized in light of our historical polity?
- Some of the suggested changes (term limits for bishops, changes in episcopal oversight, etc.) would require constitutional changes that require 2/3rds vote at General Conference and ratification from every annual conference. Such changes are exceedingly hard to make in our system, and may prove unconstitutional by Judicial Council due to our commitment to the General Superintendency of our polity. Practically, how would we navigate such changes in our historic system?

Additional, supporting documents:

- [Listening well: the role of the Episcopacy](#)
- [New models for the UM Episcopacy](#)
- [Scriptural and spiritual foundations of the UM Episcopacy](#)
- [Survey summary on the UM Episcopacy](#)