

Report to the 2021 Western Jurisdictional Conference

Workgroup Three Workgroup Episcopal Assignments

Team

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Purpose

Our task team was convened in February as a think-tank in response to the possibility that the Western Jurisdiction might need to operate with fewer than 5 bishops beginning this September 1, 2021 and do so for a number of years. Financial concerns about the Episcopacy Fund had led the Council of Bishop to request the retirement of those bishops at mandatory retirement age. Proposed legislation for a May 2021 special session of jurisdictional conference would have moved Bishop Carcaño into mandatory retirement ahead of the normal cycle. Should jurisdictions be barred from electing new ones until 2024 or beyond as was being suggested, decisions were going to have be made quickly for the West to maintain stability and support growth in mission and ministry.

We were to offer suggestions to the WJ committee on episcopacy, mission cabinet, and delegates of how the West might function with four, three, or even two bishops for a period of 3-5 years while the denomination sorted out its own transition. We were aware as we began this work that the end of this 3+ year interim time, the church would be on the other side and living into General Conference decisions. And, with 2 of the remaining bishops then at mandatory retirement age, depending on the decision of Bishop Oliveto the West could be looking at electing an entirely new slate of bishops.

Process

We felt the most helpful resource for the delegates (that we had the capacity to create in a very short amount of time) would be a series of if/then statements. "If we have 4, 3, 2 bishops, then we would need to _____, or could _____. Our task was not to design solutions for each scenario, but to do the initial work that would serve as a resource for others: jurisdictional delegates, the jurisdictional and annual conference committees on episcopacy, our college of bishops, and others who would be charged with quickly designing and implementing a different system of episcopal coverage.

Even before we were able to meet, the Council of Bishops' proposals shifted. They continued to shift across the next few months until the need for our team's help no longer existed. By early May we knew that none of our bishops would need to retire until the next regular called session of a jurisdictional conference and at that time new bishops could be elected. Bishop Hoshibata, sensing his call to active service was complete, applied for voluntary retirement beginning September 1, 2021. With elections of new bishops now intended to take place in the fall of 2022, this left the Desert Southwest Conference needing 18 months of interim coverage.

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There are provisions in the Book of Discipline for how to cover mid-quadrennium vacancies such as these, and that work was done by the WJ College of Bishops and Committee on Episcopacy.

However, the questions that surfaced during our short time of wrestling with our task may be useful as the jurisdiction prepares for the elections and transitional period that lies ahead. If we indeed can elect bishops in the fall of '22, we'll be electing a near entire class simultaneously. Only Bishop Oliveto will be eligible to continue in active status. This presents a tremendous opportunity for the jurisdiction to think creatively about the optimal form and function of episcopal leadership in the West and how to use the coming election cycle to begin the shift.

Our group quickly realized that we couldn't propose interim solutions if we couldn't name the challenges of our current structure and patterns of leadership and have some sense of what an ultimately better way might be. Having a sense of both the current reality and a desired future allowed us to imagine possible steps towards would help the jurisdiction start moving from here to there.

We started from the perspective that form follows function. Some of what we discussed fit within the bounds of the current book of discipline, while other of it would require fundamental shifts in our structure or practice and require changes to the Discipline.

Our pictures of current reality and desired future are our perceptions and should be taken as spurs to your own thinking. What may be most helpful to you are the critical questions that arise from these scenarios.

Learnings....and Critical Questions

Challenge #1

Bishops are generally elected for their skills in missional leadership, prophetic witness, pastoral voice, public theology, strategic thought...and then we put them in charge of operations in an annual conference.

While some bishops are gifted in providing administrative oversight, others are not. Putting significant time to learning and/or performing how to provide administrative and operational oversight to one (or more) annual conferences limits the time and energy bishops have for the work of spiritual leadership, public theology, advocacy, and strategic visioning. One person cannot do it all in an organization of our size and complexity without seriously compromising their health and well-being and jeopardizing the ministry they are called to shepherd.

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Once elected, a bishop is sent beyond the bounds of their annual conference and generally moved every 8 years. Across those 8 years, a conference shapes itself (or is shaped by the bishop) to fit that bishop's gift, graces, and preferences. At the end of that time, once the bishop knows the system, has created a cohesive leadership team, and built relational capital in that setting, we move them -- and they and a new annual conference start the cycle all over again. Energy goes to starting up a new cycle rather than continuing the momentum that has been built.

What if much of the operations work was separated out from a bishop's portfolio to free them for the work of visionary leadership, gospel witness, prophetic voice, and public theology. Other organizations, including other denominations, typically separate out these two roles. This role, new to our tradition would be tasked with optimizing operations, executing strategy, aligning limited resources, and acting as a partner for the bishop. While this role would require specific gifts, skills, and attributes, ordination would not be among them.

We imagine as a result a bishop who has the time and energy to be a highly visible spokesperson for the Way of Jesus as practiced by United Methodists. With a strategic eye and a voice both prophetic and pastoral, they would hold the spiritual and temporal compass for their region, monitor, tend and shape the ethos of those they oversee, and help those within the church and those beyond it think theologically about their life and work.

We imagine a stronger and more robust leadership systems within our annual conferences that are less operationally affected by the comings and goings of bishops. A clergy/lay partnership at the executive level would model clergy/lay partnership for clusters and congregations and better reflect that ministry is the work of the laity just as much as that of the clergy.

What if there were fewer bishops and they were assigned, not to an area but to the jurisdiction as a whole and each conference was resourced with 2 executive staff roles:

- A lay executive overseeing finance and administration, communications, mission, and congregational development.
- A clergy executive overseeing clergy recruitment and development, charges and complaints, and appointment making.

Or, more radically, what if we moved to a flatter system that combined the role of district superintendent and bishop with administrative functions handled at a regional level.

Compelling Questions:

What is most needed from the bishops' role for the support and development of United Methodist mission and ministry in the West? What would have to shift in our structure and work patterns for that to be their sole job function?

What steps could we take in 2022 to move us in that direction?

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Challenge #2

Bishops are elected with an eye to matching the individual's gifts and graces to the missional needs experienced by annual conferences, caucuses, and other groups within a jurisdiction. While there is an eye to creating a diverse college, that diversity only tangentially impacts the annual conferences beyond the one they serve.

Bishops function independent of one another; a bishop's territory is their own. Bishops may collaborate on jurisdictional matters but generally do not confer with one another when it comes to annual conference leadership. Annual Conferences do not have access to the gifts and skills of the other bishops unless specifically invited in by the host bishop. This feels like wasted resources.

Creative synergy among the bishops within a college is totally dependent upon whether the bishops themselves are inclined that way. A collaborative nature is not a named expectation for those seeking or serving in the episcopal office nor taken into consideration in the interview and election process. Our organizational structure and patterns of practice keep bishops in their own private lanes and fosters competition rather than collaboration. It reinforces the very model of siloed leadership that we say is bad practice for local churches and clergy and wastes the potential generative power of partnered collaboration between our key leaders.

We named, as well the lack of lay partnership, at this level of church life. Conference lay leaders can find themselves called on for figurehead duties but shut out of decision making. This reinforces a two-tier system between clergy and laity that we see played out in too many local congregations where laity are treated like expendable volunteers rather than partners in ministry.

What if a requirement for the episcopacy was a collaborative nature and skill in building generative teams?

What if, when there was more than one opening, a slate of candidates was presented who together represented not only a diversity of culture and ethnicity, but the balance of skills needed by the West.

What if bishops were not assigned to individual areas, but to the West as a whole and worked together across conference lines as a cross-functional team?

What if conference lay leaders were considered part of that team?

Compelling question:

How could our election and assignment processes foster a more generative connectionalism and deeper lay/clergy partnerships?

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Challenge #3

It will be a while before we know who are as a denomination. While the question of church division may be settled at the 2022 General Conference, some say it will take 8-10 years for the structure and ethos of the new church to really emerge. The coming quadrennium is a transitional time when we won't be what we were, and not yet what we shall be, and we'll be called to elect new bishops.

The skills and qualities needed for leading an organization through an in-between time may be very different than those needed in the United Methodist Church that lies ahead. Currently bishops are elected for life. If the proposed term limits on the episcopacy should pass at General Conference, this is less of a problem. However, this legislation has not passed before and perhaps will not pass this time. The right leadership for this next quadrennium may be the wrong leadership for the church that will arise.

What if the West elected a transitional team of bishops in 2022, whose primary task would be guiding the jurisdiction through the transition and who would agree, up front, to step out of that role at the end of four years.

Compelling Questions

What skills and attributes will be most needed in the bishops who provide leadership in the coming transitional years?

In what ways might the skills and attributes named above help or hinder in the years beyond the denomination's transition?

What is the optimal term of service for bishops in normal times?

Next Steps

Our 5 work teams had separate groups for episcopal role and function and episcopal assignments. Going forward, this work belongs together. If form is to follow function, then clarity is needed about the function of the episcopacy. Clarity on the function of the episcopacy will only come as we are clear about the mission of the Church and how best to structure it to live into our best sense of God's vision for it.

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