

Western Jurisdiction Combined Workgroup on the Episcopacy

Members of the Team - combined Episcopacy groups:

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Purpose of Episcopacy Team

The purpose of the combined workgroups on Episcopacy were to determine common themes from both groups, summarize theological and missional rationale for these themes, and make recommendations to the delegations for the purpose of writing legislation.

The Team's process

The combined team met twice to collaborate on learnings and to seek a method for presentation. A smaller writing team then met to create the summary that follows. The hope is to offer guidance and grounding for new iterations of the roles of the bishop, and the number of bishops needed for the Western Jurisdiction under the current denominational system.

Summary of learnings:

All systems self-organize. Structures, roles, processes, and functions arise for the vitality of the system. Faith systems are no different.

The Western Jurisdiction Combined Workgroup on the Episcopacy was asked to review the history and scriptural foundations for the Episcopacy, which is translated as

overseer. Between 44 and 100 C.E., the Gospels referred to several roles: apostles, disciples, elders, and bishops. However, there was little common definition of responsibilities. What little information exists can be found primarily in the Book of Acts and the writings of Early Christian writers. Over the centuries the Catholic Church developed a clear structure and hierarchy for the Church. Some protestant denominations, as they formed after the reformation, adopted similar structures.

As the Methodist Church began to emerge it was without the office of bishop. John Wesley was opposed to that role as it existed in the Anglican Church. Frances Asbury and Thomas Coke were the first to appoint themselves to that category for the purpose of managing the many newly formed churches. Their role as overseers took on a decidedly administrative and advisory function. Since that time, the role of the episcopacy has moved as a pendulum from a more highly structured administrative role to one focused more on leadership and relationship.

It is the hope of the Western Jurisdiction Combined Workgroup on the Episcopacy, which has studied this issue for several months, that you, the First Elected Delegates, will review our findings and develop legislation that will clear the way for an evolved role and function of bishops.

The combined workgroups on episcopacy have discovered that these themes have emerged as shifts that the WJ as a body are interested in, regarding the role and function of the episcopacy:

- a. **Emphasis** on the teaching and prophetic functions of the office of bishop
- b. a **return** to the spiritual and pastoral role
- c. a **yearning** for an authentic relationship
- d. a **collaborative** partnership between episcopal leaders and churches, laity, and clergy of any assignment.

Systems continuously form and adapt. It is like breathing in and out. Both are needed. Given the reality of 2021, the pendulum is ready to adjust again.

We offer the following as the outcome of our discernment. While we do not write the resolution, as First Elected Delegates, we honor your ability to do so. Please seriously consider the following areas in a resolution:

- 1) A minimum of 5 bishops would be elected to collaboratively serve the Western Jurisdiction, the largest jurisdiction by both land mass and distance in the United States. The collective responsibilities would be: Mission and Evangelism, Prophetic Witness and Preaching, Pastoral Care for the Church and its Members, Vision, Growth and Strategic Alignment, and Order of the Church and Administration. These

responsibilities would utilize individual episcopal leaders' gifts and strengths by aligning leaders with responsibilities. This collaborative leadership model would require significant delegation of administrative responsibilities to an executive administrator in each conference or episcopal area.

- 2) Explore the limiting of bishops to serving a maximum of 3 terms after which they would return to their conference of origin as an elder. This would bring the experience gained as a bishop back to enrich his or her conference of origin and would also remove the status of bishop for life.
- 3) The College of Bishops for the Western Jurisdiction would serve collaboratively; not assigning any one bishop to a single conference or episcopal area but to function as a team to meet the responsibilities of the College. Clear job descriptions would be developed and adopted.
- 4) Carefully examine and remove the corporate and colonial roots linked to the structure, function and language used in our Book of Discipline, rituals, practices, and worship. Given the timeframe of the expansion of Christianity throughout the world, missional and colonial language was a common way to define Christianity. Corporate language and thinking have also permeated the language of the church in the last century.
- 5) This is a significant transition that would take eight to ten years before it is fully incorporated in the jurisdictional and related conferences. The scope of this change is so fundamental that it would require maintaining as much stability as possible in other areas to allow for resources to be committed to this work.

We recognize this change would not be accomplished without significant challenges and related work including:

- 1) Addressing related changes to the Book of Discipline, including but not limited to the role and scope of work for the Western Jurisdiction Episcopacy, term limits and removal of bishop for life status.
- 2) A solid review and understanding of the resulting financial and other resource distribution for the Episcopacy and a plan for sustainability.
- 3) Creating a team of clergy, laity and retired bishops to plan for, guide, advise and evaluate the collaborative function of the College of Bishops where the bishops would not serve in residential area, but be available to the entire Jurisdiction within the roles outlined above.
- 4) Staying alert to the human condition of resistance to change. While The United Methodist Church has remained faithful to the gospel, the mission and vision of the church, it has always adapted to the administrative and cultural needs of the community. It is time to do that again.

Any change of this magnitude will require years to implement, adjust, and fine tune. We would recommend the following:

Within the next 1–3 years a resolution would be passed that forms an Episcopal Implementation Committee, with the explicit task of developing a new model for the

episcopacy and a plan for implementation of the model across the Western Jurisdiction. This committee would include selective bishops, clergy and laity from each episcopal area in the WJ.

Within the next 1–3 years explore a resolution to be passed setting a 2-3 term limit for newly elected bishops, sunset the bishop for life status with all currently serving bishops, report on the financial impact of these changes with emphasis on how to sustain the new system and establish the position of executive administrator in each conference and/or episcopal area.

The next 3–5 years explore moving fully into a collaborative model for the College of Bishops with no single bishop with the flexibility of bishops serving the entire Western Jurisdiction, and collectively serving individual episcopal areas.

By 5–8 years the model would be fully implemented with focus on aligning conference and episcopal area structures and functions. Evaluation of this model would be conducted by a team of retired bishops, clergy and laity toward continuous fine tuning.