

## Statement on Interim Operations Team/Connectional Table proposals

January 27, 2012

There is legislation coming to General Conference to combine all the governing structures of the general agencies into one 15-person board and also to allow annual conferences to place the functions of the conference commission on archives and history in an alternate structure. I encourage you to be in touch with your general conference delegates, especially the persons serving on the General Administration legislative committee to indicate how these changes will be detrimental to our work.

As General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History, I want this agency to remain free-standing with its own governance structure, and accountable to the General Conference and those structures that the General Conference has created to provide agency oversight. I do not want to surrender governance functions to another body. You may say that I am protecting turf and lobbying for the status quo. You are right. When I was elected as general secretary, I came to this job with deep commitment to the value of heritage in forming identity, informing vision for ministry, and transforming individuals to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Our work is vital to the health of The United Methodist Church and any action that would diminish our effectiveness must be opposed. But this is not an effort to protect my job. If that was eliminated, I qualify for retirement so this is not about my own situation.

I was pastor of local UM congregations for 35 years prior to my service at GCAH, starting with a small rural congregation, serving as an associate in a large church, and concluding with a worshipping congregation of about 300. I believe that these churches had the marks of vital congregations. I am grateful for the conversation generated by the Call to Action and Interim Operations Team and for all efforts that will assist congregations to be all that God intended them to be, but I regret that so much focus seems to be on altering the governing pattern of the general agencies. This is misplaced, but it doesn't excuse those of us in leadership of the general agencies from commenting on the potential impact of this proposal.

The current membership of GCAH includes 24 persons, 10 of whom are nominated by the Council of Bishops for election at General Conference, 7 at large members selected by a nominating committee of GCAH directors, 5 persons who serve as chairpersons of jurisdictional commissions on archives and history, and 2 bishops, one of whom must be from a Central Conference. Also, of the 24, three must be from the Central Conferences, with each region represented. In addition to the firm commitment to reflect the rich diversity of the church, there are needed persons with competencies in archival work and historical studies. The current set of directors include the Assistant Archivist for the National Archives of Mozambique, the chair of the South Carolina State Commission on Archives, two current university faculty members, a former editor of the *Christian Century* and theological school professor, and chairs of conference commissions. Our commission includes persons from three racial/ethnic groups. It is an extraordinary group, and I could go on at some length about each director and what he or she brings to our work together. There is no reason to remove from them decisions about budgets, evaluation, personnel, strategic planning, and other governance issues. A 15 person committee, a 45 person advisory council, and the creation of smaller

advisory groups for specialized work like this cannot bring the same level of expertise and focus.

In addition to the expertise that commission members bring to the table, there are unanticipated benefits. One of the most striking illustrations involves a contact made by a GCAH director who presently leads the English-speaking UMC in Moscow, Russia, with a descendant of Bishop Gilbert Haven, abolitionist and advocate for racial justice from the 1850s through the 1870s. This relationship led the family to place with the United Methodist Archives at Drew University a collection of over 1,000 letters to and from Haven that was hitherto unknown to scholars. Without the director's assistance, the materials would have gone to another depository that serves fewer researchers and is not a center of United Methodist research.

I want to be very clear about the value of those who serve as directors of the commission. I take great umbrage with those who suggest the directors are controlled by staff. Anyone who has ever attended a GCAH meeting knows the level and liveliness of thoughtful interaction and discussion that takes place.

I have two significant concerns about the proposals as a whole. First is the lack of any serious historical work by the authors of the proposals about previous restructuring schemes, including a lack of historical consciousness about the trajectory of membership and its causes. There has been a complete lack of historical and sociological analysis of church membership patterns. The focus has been on corporate systems analysis rather than history or theology. The current proposals seem to be more the dying gasp of an old paradigm than envisioning a new paradigm. My other concern is that the proposals concerning the structures of the general agencies lack any evidence to support claims that the church will be better off or that more vital congregations will be created. It is simply an effort to cut the budgets. This is an ideologically-driven plan that does not indicate how it will benefit the church or achieve its claims. Nothing that I have seen speaks of the importance of pastoral care and the place of ritual for all of life's transitions.

Perhaps the wisdom of the apostle Paul might be brought to bear in this situation as I believe that the body of Christ has many parts but it is not necessary to merge all parts into one whole in order for it to be an effective and coordinated organism (cf. I Corinthians 12). I close with the words of Natalie Sleeth, "From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery; unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

**The Robert J. Williams**

General Secretary, Commission on Archives and History