

Editor's Note: The Rev. Robert Williams, top executive secretary of the United Methodist Commission on Archives and History, presented A Historical Perspective on the Creation of a "Set Aside" Bishop at the Pre-General Conference briefing Jan. 19, 2012, in Tampa, Fla. These are his remarks with some additions.

By the Rev. Robert J. Williams*

Introduction

In spite of the difficulty of this task, I welcome the chance to provide a glimpse of a historical perspective possibly informing the conversation around a bishop being relieved of residential responsibilities to perform denomination-wide service. While our corporate memory cannot tell you the right decision to make, I hope it will inform that decision and you may have some interest in this history. Each one of us makes decisions about our own lives based on our memory and experience. Sometimes we reject what has been done. Memory can be painful, and I think of that when I sing, "Lift every voice and sing." One verse says, "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us" and another, "Out of the gloomy past, till now we stand at last." Sometimes we embrace our heritage and know we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." A personal example: my parents required me to commute to college to save dormitory costs. I wanted a different experience for my daughters and told them they would live at college unless they strenuously protested. They did not protest. I hope I can provide some background that will indicate that discussions of leadership, management and effectiveness are not new.

I have been drawn to Ecclesiastes as I have listened to the conversation about change. It's not a popular book of the Bible and maybe is too fatalistic or deterministic, but chapter 1:9-11 has caught my attention: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them."

Vignettes from our history

Issues of leadership and management have been a part of our life from the beginning. With John Wesley, there wasn't much need to debate because he led and managed and completely controlled the life of the connection. He wouldn't dare take the title of bishop because of the Anglican context of the movement, but he certainly functioned as one, ordaining persons in 1784 and authorizing [Thomas Coke](#) to ordain when coming to America. (After serving as president of the Methodist conference in Ireland, Wesley appointed Coke superintendent for America.)

Another pioneer in Methodism was [Francis Asbury](#) (founding bishop of the Methodist Church in America). (Developing evangelism by using circuit riders, he himself traveled thousands of miles on horseback every year. Born in England, he was the first bishop of the Methodist churches in the United States.) In 1789 and 1790, Asbury created what was known as the Council, consisting of bishops and presiding elders. Such a concentration of power was short lived and ultimately

gave rise to the quadrennial General Conference in 1792 as a way of correcting the cumbersome nature of 11 annual conferences but no unifying structure.

The model of episcopacy lived out by Asbury was itinerant and imperial. He traveled, and he was in charge. The McKendree model was a collegial style. (Elected to the episcopacy in 1808, William McKendree was the fourth bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the first Methodist bishop born in the United States.) In a lecture, the Rev. Kenneth Rowe, retired emeritus professor of church history at Drew University, stated, “The new bishop consecrated in 1808, Virginia-born who had been Asbury’s assistant in Kentucky, had his own ideas about the nature of the episcopal office and introduced several innovations designed to soften the inherited imperial style. Bishop McKendree:

- Insisted on collegiality among bishops and forced Asbury to share authority and power. The Methodist Episcopal Church would have no one bishop in charge.
- Delivered the first Episcopal Address on the state of the church at the opening of the General Conference of 1812, acknowledging his new role and upstaging the aging Asbury
- Began consultation in appointment-making
- Introduced administration by episcopal areas by suggesting to Asbury, “You take these conferences, and I’ll take those.”

A later bishop, James O. Andrew, wrote in January 1859:

Nor did the Bishops of olden time, after all, do so much more work than their modern descendants do annually. Perhaps Bishop Asbury visited more Annual Conferences than we do; but presiding in an Annual Conference then was a much lighter task than it is now. ... We had not a dozen associations whose complicated machinery requires several days to adjust and keep in proper order. Now we have so many things before us at our Conferences that it is impossible to do anything well without a longer time than we can usually bestow on any one Conference.

We can only mention that the Methodist Protestants did not have bishops, the British Methodists in all its branches did not and do not have bishops, and we should be more familiar with the Evangelical United Brethren Church understanding of the episcopacy. “In 1946 nine men were elected to the episcopacy, and though each was a bishop of the whole church, each was assigned to one of the nine episcopal areas for immediate oversight. In this church, as in its predecessors, the episcopate was not a separate ministerial order but an administrative responsibility, quadrennially awarded to elders elected to the office. In addition to their conventional pastoral and administrative responsibilities, with increasing frequency the bishops were called upon to express positions on numerous and various subjects such as faith healing, glossolalia, group ministry, moral rearmament, and intercommunion.” [J. Bruce Behney & Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 358]

Transitions in the ways bishops functioned

In the 19th century, bishops were not assigned to residential responsibilities in specific annual conferences. In a sense, all the bishops were “set aside” for connection-wide responsibilities. It was not uncommon for bishops to preside at 10 or more conferences in a year. Conferences were

held in both the spring and the fall of the year. Incrementally, bishops were assigned to live in various cities across the country and sometimes assigned to cities outside the United States. In 1912, in the Methodist Episcopal Church, a plan of Episcopal Residential Supervision mandated which conferences were assigned to which bishops. This evolved into the situation that now prevails with most bishops serving one conference and a few bishops serving two conferences. The itinerant general superintendency transformed itself into bishops providing more direct administrative leadership in a conference with the often-repeated appeal that bishops are still general superintendents of the whole church.

1964 —The Coordinating Council brought a report about the general superintendency to the 1964 General Conference, which included legislation that permitted a one-year churchwide assignment and included a suggestion that the Council of Bishops “might give sincere consideration to a full time executive officer.”

1968 Efforts to relieve the Council of Bishops secretary from residential duties

The movement toward a fulltime president goes back to 1968. The Council of Bishops took to General Conference a petition in the form of a Constitutional Amendment to ¶54 (now ¶49) calling for the addition of the following sentence: Nothing herein shall prevent assignment on a quadrennial basis of one bishop for full-time responsibility in the Council of Bishops. The Uniting Conference of 1968 voted to send this amendment first to the annual conferences, where it was approved by an aggregate vote of 21,699 to 5,585, an 80 percent majority, far greater than the two-thirds called for. This was reported back to the 1970 Special Session of General Conference (St. Louis), where it failed to receive the necessary two-thirds vote.

The actual petition read, “The Council of Bishops may, with the consent of the Bishop concerned and with the concurrence of the Committee on Episcopacy of the jurisdiction involved, assign one of its members as full-time Secretary of the Council for a quadrennium.” This was to be in the legislative section but required the constitutional amendment mentioned above. The language that was to be brought to the 1970 special session of the General Conference read: “The Council of Bishops may, with the consent of the Bishop and with the concurrence of the Committee on Episcopacy of the jurisdiction involved, assign one bishop to full-time secretarial responsibility for the Council of Bishops. The Secretary of the Council of Bishops shall be released from residential and presidential responsibilities of an episcopal area. ...”

This was a time when the secretary of the council served a four-year term (as is still the case) and the president served a one-year term. The secretary served as the ecumenical entry point and was considered, “Head of Communion” for ecumenical issues. Strong secretaries included Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, Bishop Roy Short and Bishop James Mathews.

What I found more interesting from that time were two addresses at the November 1967 meeting of the Council of Bishops as it looked forward to the union with the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The point is that 45 years later, the comments sound so current and familiar. Bishop W. Kenneth Goodson gave an address entitled, “What leadership can the united church expect from the episcopacy?”

He wrote, "But the Church also expects collective leadership of its bishops." He enumerated five criticisms of the council:

1. The Council of Bishops does not take a sufficiently aggressive lead in the affairs of the church as a whole.
2. It does not do a sufficiently effective promotional job.
3. It does not move in effectively with reference to situations obtaining in society in general.
4. It does not speak to the church often enough or with sufficient clarity and effectiveness on current concerns of the church and of society.
5. It has not found ways and means to administer "unitedly" the total church, which is to say it does not move in as a council on the particular affairs of episcopal areas; each bishop and episcopal are remaining largely units unto themselves.

He called for the council to fulfill more of an executive function and not merely an administrative and promotional function. He wrote, "Would not the whole Church, as well as the Bishops, benefit from an arrangement whereby a member of the Council of Bishops might be relieved of episcopal supervision of a geographical area in order to devote full time and energy to special responsibilities and assignments throughout the connection?"

Bishop Fred Holloway delivered a paper on "What is the future role of the bishop?" The sentence that caught my eye was, "I must say that I believe we should give more attention to our own areas and less to the idea of general superintendence." The debate continues.

1972-76

There was a study committee on the episcopacy and superintendency, but nothing in the report bears on this conversation.

1988-89

The issue was not raised again for 20 years. The council president, Bishop Jack Tuell (1988-89), appointed a committee to study and make recommendations on Council of Bishops leadership structure. This committee was chaired by Bishop James Ault, former council secretary. The committee brought back a structure that called for a set-aside presiding bishop of the church. The report was not approved by the council.

2001-03

The issue of restructured Council of Bishops leadership was placed on the table again in 2001, when the Council Life and Work Committee was asked to undertake a study on leadership needs of the council. The study soon discovered that while the Council of Bishops is well organized to lead itself, the denomination's growing needs called for more continuity of leadership from the council.

This reality surfaced in a 2001 survey of the Council of Bishops. The question was asked, "Does the council need more continuity of its leadership in order to more effectively lead the church?" The answer was overwhelmingly, "Yes!"

The committee spent two years in study and conversation with the Council of Bishops. Out of concerns within and outside of the council, a leadership proposal was presented in the fall 2002 meeting and overwhelmingly adopted with a vote of 33 to 18 for a four-year set-aside president.

In order to enable this leadership structure, the Council of Bishops, after intensive legal research and conversation, decided to ask the 2004 General Conference to amend ¶406.3 which currently allows the council to “set aside” a bishop for up to two years for a special assignment. Since the principle was already in place (and has been exercised by the council), it was decided to ask for two additional years, giving the council a four-year set-aside president.

As a first step, the Council of Bishops asked the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision on the constitutionality of such a petition. The case was argued before the Judicial Council at its spring 2003 meeting. Decision 961 rendered the request “unconstitutional,” arguing that ¶49 limited the episcopal office to only presidential and residential responsibilities. The constitution trumped the rest of the Discipline.

General Conference 2004

The Council of Bishops then filed a petition to the 2004 General Conference calling for a Constitutional Amendment to ¶49 and for additional legislation to ¶406.3, which would enable the council, at such time as it might see fit, to implement the plan for a four-year set-aside bishop. The Legislative Committee on Higher Education and Ministry, chaired by then Rev. Robert Schnase, carefully considered the proposal, and approved the two petitions overwhelmingly by votes of 80-10 and 77-12. (See pp. 1754-55 of the 2004 DCA for a record of these votes.) When these petitions came to the floor (DCA pp. 2195-97), they had considerable support from several speakers. But at some point, a motion to refer it all to the Episcopacy Study Committee was made. This was debated. Then Sandra Lackore asked permission to speak and said that if these two motions were adopted and ratified, GCFA would have to add \$1 million to \$2 million to the budget that was before the body. The Council of Bishops was already on record not to implement the plan at any time during the quadrennium if the legislation passed. But her words of warning were not refuted on the floor, and the motion to refer was adopted by a vote of 478-430, which was still remarkably close.

Significance of change in light of our history

History does not prescribe a particular course of action, but that does not diminish its importance. Each of you must decide if the needs of the church today call for one bishop to be in a role not yet experienced in the church. Just because it hasn't been done doesn't mean it shouldn't be done. Just because it hasn't been done doesn't mean it should be done. It is up to others to anticipate what may be the benefits or the unintended consequences of this change. All that can be said from our heritage is that it is a departure from the practice that developed after Wesley and Asbury. I'm quite sure that a set-aside bishop will not pretend to be either a Wesley or Asbury in our midst. Strong leaders have emerged without official action – bishops such as Simpson, Haven, McConnell, Clair, A. P. Shaw, Oxnam, Corson, Mathews, Esher and Debs.

Rowe said in a lecture, “We Methodists need not be at all ashamed in confessing our grateful pride in our Methodist heritage, but it is just this pride and gratitude that should prompt us to strike for an equally open and hopeful future.”

We may be about to do a new thing or may be only the latest expression of seeking inspirational leadership, a compelling vision and effective management so that Jesus Christ will be made known and the love of God and love of neighbor will increase in the world! Natalie Sleeth wrote, "From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery; unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."