

**Episcopal Tenure Task Force**  
**Report to the Council of Bishops**

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**REFLECTIONS ON EPISCOPAL TENURE**

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**History, Background, and Context:**

The United Methodist Church has as a Restrictive Rule in its constitution protecting “the plan of our itinerant general superintendency” (§ 19). This, along with the other Restrictive Rules, were added to the constitution of the Methodist Episcopal Church upon the adoption of its first constitution in 1808. This rule expressed Bishop Asbury’s own concern that the General Conference should not be able to alter specific elements of the nascent denomination’s life.

The precise meaning of “the plan of our itinerant general superintendency” has been debated. For Asbury and the early Methodist Episcopal Church, it implied life tenure for superintendents who by the late 1780s had begun to identify themselves as bishops. Similarly, Philip William Otterbein and Jacob Albright served as bishops of their respective churches until their own deaths.

Other predecessors and sister churches of the UMC have taken differing views. The Methodist Protestant Church adopted a term-limited superintendency from the time its organization in 1830, with a term-limited president presiding over the denomination. Similarly, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church originally had a term-limited superintendency, contrasting with the strong life episcopacy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church by the 1880s had adopted life episcopacy, and leaders of the Methodist Protestant Church eventually agreed to take on life episcopacy upon their union with the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1939. The Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) Church had bishops elected to four-year terms and had a provision for the re-election of bishops. They also provided that retired bishops could continue to be recognized as bishops emeriti.

There exists today a variety of approaches to episcopal tenure between the jurisdictions and central conferences of the UMC. The jurisdictions in the USA have retained life tenure for bishops, whereas some of the central conferences have varying forms of term episcopacy.

Recognizing this breadth of historical and contemporary approaches, the task force has considered a number of options that we offer for the Council's reflection.

### **Perceived Presenting Issues:**

- Questions of episcopal leadership especially in light the current divisions over upholding current church law and/or prophetically calling for either change or enforcement of *The Discipline*.
- Concomitant issues of accountability and effectiveness of bishops; there is a perceived inability to hold bishops accountable for their effectiveness in office. Calls for term episcopacy are a way to develop a perceived tool to hold bishops accountable for their actions.
- There are ongoing perceptions of power and authority both in terms of abuse of power and of lack of authority/loss of power and ability to lead the church. Bishop Oden noted in consultation that in the 1939 unification there was an agreement over life episcopacy in the United States. He further notes in his historical work that the real issue is over power and not life tenure. The power struggle is at its base one between bishops and General Conference.
- The role of retired bishops is at question. In particular there is a perceived restiveness over advocacy without responsibility. Additionally there is a perceived lack of accountability for retired bishops.
- Behind these issues reside a deeper debate over the precisely what the supervisory and oversight role of bishops is. We moving from what has been called a management episcopacy to a missionary episcopacy. Such a movement raises great anxiety about the role (function), authority and power of bishops. On the one hand, the church is desperately crying out for decisive leadership and simultaneously proposing action that we will make the very leadership most needed hard to provide.
- The question has been raised, by the Judicial Council's rejection of PlanUMC at the 2012 General Conference, as to what responsibilities bishops have with respect to oversight of the general church. One of the principal objections that the Judicial Council had to this plan was that it sought to invest oversight in a council apart from the Council of Bishops, and the constitution of the UMC states that bishops are to develop annually a "plan for the general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual interests of the entire Church and for carrying into effect the rules, regulations, and responsibilities prescribed and enjoined by the General Conference" (§ 47). This raises the critical issue of whether and how the Council of Bishops could interact with other leaders in the oversight of the general church.
- Concerns that we are widely divided in our current practice of episcopal tenure and need to unify episcopal tenure for the whole church.
- Others?

**Options for consideration:**

1. Leave current status and tenure unchanged.
2. Unify episcopal tenure for the whole church (i.e. the same for both Jurisdictional and Central Conference bishops)
3. Change to adopt Lay Leaders recommendation
  - a. Support a term concept
  - b. Elected for 8 years
  - c. Eligible for one re-election of either 4 or 8 years.
4. Retired bishops do not remain on the Council but have their membership placed with a conference of their choosing on retirement.

**Other Options for Consideration of Term Episcopacy:**

1. Limit of 16 years of service or less; bishop returns to order of elder in annual conference of his/her selection; retains title of bishop for the whole church. (no reelection)
2. Election for 12 years and then return to local church/conference (no reelection)
3. Elected for 4 year terms, eligible for reelection.
4. Elected 8 years; (no reelection)
5. Elected for 8 years; possibility for reelection for two addition terms (one election)
6. Elected for 4 year term; edible for reelection with a maximum of 3 terms or 12
7. Elected for 4 year term; eligible for reelection for life to mandatory retirement
8. Elected for life to office but must be reassigned by JCE (Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy) every 4 years with the possibility of being assigned to a non-residential appointment.
9. Elected for a maximum of 20 years.

**Other Options for Consideration of Life Episcopacy:**

1. Current status and tenure remains unchanged
2. Retired bishops are no longer members of the council.
3. Separation of charism from residential assignment. A bishop in a non-residential setting could carry out functions of a bishop that are not restricted to residential assignment.
4. In retirement or non-residential assignment a bishop picks a Conference to affiliate with.
5. Ordination as a third order.

**Some Further Options to Consider:**

1. Have *a separate ordination (as contrasted with consecration) for bishops?* A little-known fact in our history is that services for the recognition of superintendents/bishops in the Methodist Episcopal Church were referred to as services of “ordination” rather than “consecration” between 1789 and 1844. Moreover, the United Methodist Church received the World Council of Churches Faith and Order document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and

formally approved *The COCU Consensus*, both of which call for a recognition of three orders of ministry (deacons, presbyters/elders, and bishops).

2. Have a specific provision for a bishop to be appointed to another ministry (such as pastor of a congregation) and retain the title and some of the functions of a bishop? Such a provision would allow a jurisdictional committee on the episcopacy to assign a bishop to a congregation instead of an assignment to be the presiding bishop in an episcopal area. This would allow the possibility of removing a bishop from functioning as bishop over an episcopal area without violating the Restrictive Rule that calls for a process of trial and appeal for the removal of clergy from active ministry. If we made such a provision, would bishops appointed to churches or other ministries be able to retain some of the functions unique to bishops with the permission or at the invitation of the presiding bishop in her or his episcopal area? For example, a bishop appointed to a congregation or another ministry might be asked by her or his presiding bishop to participate as a United Methodist bishop in ordinations and consecrations with bishops of other churches (such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) that have concordat agreements with the UMC.

3. Have a provision that a person would retain the title of bishop while going back to a Conference in retirement?

#### **Questions for Table Discussion:**

*What would be the very best way to configure life episcopacy and what would be the very best way to configure term episcopacy?*

*What plan will best strength leadership for the church?*

#### **Some Resources:**

Russell E. Richey and Thomas Earl Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition: Perspectives and Proposals* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

Gerald F. Moede, *The Office of Bishop in Methodism: Its History and Development* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964).

James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists* (Denominations in America series, no. 8; Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 1996), Part I, "Bishops," pp. 1-61.