

GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Tampa, Florida, USA, 24 April to 4 May 2012

About a thousand delegates from all parts of the world where the United Methodist Church is established, and around 2500 visitors gathered at the Convention Center in Tampa, Florida, United States of America, from 24th April to 4th May this year, for the GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH. This highest legislative church body establishes general policies of the United Methodist Church, meets every four years to determine the direction of the denomination. It is the only body that officially speaks on behalf of more than twelve million members who compose the United Methodist Church.

The THEME of the General Conference of 2012 was "MAKING DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST THAT TRANSFORM THE WORLD. Delegates considered more than a thousand petitions, established policies, plans and budgets approved and dealt with various other matters. There was simultaneous translation into Swahili, English, French, German, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian and American sign language. The Africa Central Conference was represented by 36 delegates, being 12 from West Angola, 1 from East Angola, 2 from South Mozambique, 2 from North Mozambique, 3 from South Africa, 2 from East Zimbabwe, 2 from West Zimbabwe, 2 from Malawi e 10 from East Africa.

The Opening Session began at 4.00 PM on the 24th April, with a liturgical celebration that included the service of Holy Communion. Bishop Larry Goodpaster, the Annual Conference of Charlotte, North Carolina and chairman of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church was the preacher, and spoke of "Radical Invitation," reflecting on the theme of the first day, and inviting the over 4500 people present to hear the call of Jesus "in the midst of legislation that will fill all our time and consume our energies ..." The following are most noteworthy aspects of the General Conference.

1) The EPISCOPAL MESSAGE was given by Bishop Peter Weaver of the Boston Annual Conference, during the Plenary session of the 25th April, followed by the Laity and the Young Adults Addresses. This fact marked the 2000th anniversary of the first episcopal message. Bishop Weaver's message was entitled *Revolution of the Resurrection: Christ's Resurrection with Resurrection of the People for a World Risen*.

Mrs. Betty Spiwe Kativo, Zimbabwe, who spoke on behalf of the laity, challenged the plenary: "Imagine if every layperson brings one person to Jesus Christ in every year," she said.

2) 13 LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEES of the General Conference worked diligently in petitions and other matters. The debate of over 70 petitions on *homosexuality* resulted in the reaffirmation of the traditional principle and discipline of the United Methodism, whereby this practice "is incompatible with Christian teaching." There were demonstrations of groups seeking changes in church law, on and off the floor, which prohibits the ordination of persons who practice homosexuality and the marriage of persons of the same sex. It was also approved a proposal to terminate the *guaranteed pastoral appointments* in the United Methodist Church. A proposal that would allow elders and deacons be ordained soon as they complete their educational requirements was not approved. The General Conference celebrated on the night of April 30 the decision to enter into full communion with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Union Methodist Protestant Church and the American Union Methodist Episcopal Church. He also welcomed the representatives of the global Wesleyan denominations present in the Conference.

3) RESTRUCTURING SCHEDULED FOR 2012 DID NOT OCCUR. As the final session took its last steps, the Judicial Council dropped a bomb that struck the assembly: the PLAN OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH (Plan UMC), which provided for the realignment of the 13 general agencies that serve the United Methodist Church, was declared as "unconstitutional." The decision came at the request of a "declaratory decision" of the constitutionality of the plan, which restructured the United Methodist Church, which had already been approved by the plenary of the General Conference. In short: there is no "restructuring," therefore the structure adopted by the General Conference in 2008 will remain intact.

4) The 2012 General Conference voted to make United Methodist Women Division a structurally autonomous agency of

the General Board of Global Ministries, of which has been a member, keeping at the same time a missional relationship.

5) The 2012 General Conference created a new Episcopal Area at the CENTRAL CONGO Annual Conference, in the Congo Central Conference, thereby increasing the number of bishops this area (from three) to four. The costs associated with the addition of a fourth bishop in Central Congo Annual Conference shall be borne by the budget of the Episcopal Fund of the Church United Methodist. Restored the BURUNDI Annual Conference, as a part of the East Africa Annual Conference, within the Africa Central Conference. The United Methodist Church in MALAWI became a Provisional Annual Conference, under the Zimbabwe Annual Conference, of the Africa Central Conference. As particular note, Bishops Hans Vaxby, Eurasia Area, and Leo Soriano, Davo Area, in the Philippines, retired from active service in this session of the General Conference.

6) On April 30, the General Conference did not approve a petition that would create a "set aside president" for the Council of Bishops, among the Bishops of the Church, who would be free residential and presidential of responsibilities in Jurisdictional or Central Conferences while assuming this office. In order to be approved, it required a two-thirds majority vote of the delegates, since it was a paragraph of the Constitution. This proposal was not adopted, as had already happened in the legislative committee that dealt with this subject. This problem of a non-resident bishop who would assume the duties of President of the Council of Bishops, is dragging since the 1968 General Conference. Several delegates have expressed fears that a full-time president of the Council of Bishops would have too many powers, or that this position would be considered to be "the face of the United Methodist Church," whether or not this was the intention of the proposal. The Council of Bishops had expressed through the whole process, that that position would be to just lead and let the Council of Bishops to concentrate, to give more time and energy to the process."

7) On April 25, dedicated as World Malaria Day, delegates to the General Conference of 2012 were reminded of the existence of this evil. Bishop Thomas Bickerton of the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, and Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone were among the figures who announced that the United Methodist Church was in the forefront of the struggle to end to malaria in Africa. The campaign work *IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT MALARIA* has been concentrated primarily in our continent, because 90% of the global burden of malaria falls on sub-Saharan Africa, where children and pregnant women are the most vulnerable.

8) On the 27th April the General Conference conducted a Act of Repentance of the injustices caused by the Americans to Native American populations. Rev. " Tink" Tinker George, himself a Native American, brought the message during the act of repentance for the healing of relationships with indigenous peoples.

9) In sidelines of the General Conference of 21,012, bishops and clergy and lay delegates present, of the Africa Central Conference, had consultation meetings, to agree on dates, procedures and other matters relating to the completion of XII Session of the Africa Central Conference. Nairobi. Kenya from 15 to 19 August 2012. The theme is the same of the General Conference: "Making Disciples of Jesus Christ That Transform the World." The agenda will consist of episcopal elections, Central Conference legislation, considerations on self sustainability, issues discussed in the General Conference including the positioning of the Central Conference concerning them and training on petitions. The executive committee of the Africa Central Conference ratified unanimously the decision of the General Conference that reinstates the BURUNDI ANNUAL CONFERENCE. It further resolved that each Annual Conference participates with six delegates to the session of the Conference Center, and approved the budget this session, which would be covered with the donation of the General Board of Global Ministries and the contribution of the Annual Conferences.

10) In what concerns the constitution of Committees of the General Conference Africa was well represented: - Mateus Francisco district superintendent of the Regions, who served as vice chairman of the Credentials Committee, and the Subcommittee on Discipleship; Evariste Kimba Kyakutala , North Katanga, served as secretary of the Committee for the Affairs of the Central Conference; Mande Raymond Mutombo Mulumishimba and Nelly W. Wright, North Katanga and Liberia, who served as vice-presidents of the Commission on Church and Society (A and B); Robert Kilembo, of Zambia, served as vice chairman of the Committee on Conferences and Betty S.Katiyo, West of Zimbabwe, as vice chairman of the Committee on General Administration; Jean Marie Nkongwe, of South of the Congo, as vice chairman of the Committee on Global Ministries; Mariama SB Bockart, Sierra Leone, as vice president of the Independent Commissions and Julius Sarwold Nelson. Jr, Liberia, as president of the Independent sub-committee; Anthony G.

Dioh, Liberia, as vice president of the Commission on Higher Education and Ministry and Ndala Joseph Mulongo, North Katanga, who served as vice chairman of the Committee on Superintendency.

Still to sidelines of the General Conference, African bishops met to plan the meeting of the COLLEGE OF BISHOPS OF AFRICA scheduled for 3 to 7 September 2012, in the Africa University in Zimbabwe. The impact and assessment of the recent General Conference session on our continent, the issue of homosexuality, joint projects, visits to churches and prospects of holding the next meeting in Angola in 2013, are some subjects that will appear in the agenda.

11) The Commission on the General Conference, spoke about the determination of hold a General Conference in one of the Central Conferences no later than 2024. For reasons of size, structure, and duration of the problem of the division of delegates, and the fact that they continue to think that the General Conference is held in a location where the presence of the United Methodist Church is significant, led the Commission on

General Conference to conclude that *holding* a General Conference session outside the United States would incur in significant costs. However, members of this Committee concluded that it would be up to the General Conference to determine in the future whether or not it would be worthwhile to gather outside the U.S., making it a priority for our Church.

12) Bishops Nkulu Ntanda Ntambo of Northern Katanga, and Joaquina Nhanala of Mozambique, presided over the proceedings of the General Conference on the morning of April 27, and the evening session on April 29, 2012, respectively.

13) Rev . Dr . J. Kabamba Kiboco, South of the Congo, and currently living in the United States, and Dr. Oswald Tweh, Liberian lawyer and former president of the National Association of Lawyers of Liberia, were elected members of the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church. In turn, Dr. Kasap Owant, president of the Katanga United Methodist University, was elected member of the University Senate of the United Methodist Church.

14) The General Conference established a Fund for Central Conferences Theological Education, that will be used outside the United States to develop theological colleges and courses of studies, libraries and contextualized development resources, scholarships and teachers development as well as to support organizations and networks of teachers and schools. The Fund will also support new initiatives in the field of theological education. The General Board of Higher Education will administer the fund, which at first will be 5 million dollars. With the rapid growth of United Methodism in many of the Central Conferences, there is a growing need to contextualize relevant theological education outside the United States. The Church at large should implement a stable fund for theological education in Central Conferences.

15) As to financial participation of Central Conferences the overall budget of the United Methodist Church, each episcopal area of the Central Conference will participate with 10% of the total episcopal plan expenditure of their respective areas. It was also proposed that the Central Conferences increase their contribution to the general budget of the Church, and that they do not rely only on the United States. Self-sufficiency should be the ultimate goal.