

# Monthly Update

April 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

While we include information on General Conference 2021 (now GC2022), we are also covering two other issues that may seem a bit strange for a renewal group newsletter, but it is important to examine them because they are relevant in our nation at this time. A lack of space precludes us from one other important matter – that of the “Equality Act (H.R. 5)” that gives to those who identify as “LGBTQ” the same special protections as racial minorities. As with some other misguided issues, it is supported by our United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, the political lobby for our church. It is disappointing that money given in good faith by the laity to do God’s work supports what the Bible calls “sin” and helps to lead people astray. We must love and pray for these people, but we must also understand that God is holy and we must stand for truth.

The analysis by David Scott addresses challenges of a possible virtual, or as he calls it, a “distributed” General Conference. However, it is important to remember that since he is involved with the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, he does approach the issue from a “left-of-center” polity perspective within the denomination. With that being said, for the most part, it is a fairly good analysis.

The first issue is that of “wasp spray” – since many of our readers are ladies and “senior citizens” who may be less capable of defending themselves than a young man who is physically fit. There are exceptions: a young man broke into the wrong house in England where a 73-year-old man lived with his wife. The elderly man had retired from the Royal Marines and knew self-defense; I saw pictures of the badly-beaten 23-year-old and the retired serviceman who was still angry that his home had been invaded and his wife threatened. With the talk going on here in the United States about “gun control” we are not sure how this issue will be resolved. While guns in-and-of-themselves are neutral, they do provide effective means of self-defense; if they are not available, we should know what means we can use to protect our homes and those we love.

The second issue has to do with that of vaccines for the Covid-19 virus and the type to get – or not get. This is important since some of our readers are up to 97 years of age, but all of us are susceptible to get the virus so we must know our risks – and preventive measures we can take. Personally, in addition to information I had outlined in our December Update (especially zinc and Vitamin D), I also drink 16 ounces daily of tonic water that contains quinine. I do not plan to take the vaccine. I would urge each of you to examine what is the best course of action for you to take and weigh the risks of each.

Thank you for standing with us in your prayers and financial support. Both undergird what we do at this crucial time in the history of our church and our nation. We ask that you continue to pray for both – and for our ministry.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris  
Executive Director

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## April 2021 Update

### **Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church**

Men have been helped to live by remembering that they must die. ~ Charles Spurgeon

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#### **Of Interest.**

+ *Wasp spray*. [Note: I have known of this, but am reprinting this article since it gives some useful information. – AOM]

If you don't have a gun, and even if you do, here's a way to wreck someone's evil plans for you. Did you know this? I never really thought of it before. I guess I can get rid of the baseball bat.

Wasp Spray -- A friend who is a receptionist in a church in a high risk area was concerned about someone coming into the office on Monday to rob them when they were counting the collection. She asked the local police department about using pepper spray and they recommended to her that she get a can of wasp spray instead. The wasp spray, they told her, can shoot up to twenty feet away and is a lot more accurate, while with the pepper spray, they have to get too close to you and could overpower you. The wasp spray temporarily blinds an attacker until they get to the hospital for an antidote. She keeps a can on her desk in the office and it doesn't attract attention from people like a can of pepper spray would. She also keeps one nearby at home for home protection. Thought this was interesting and might be of use.

On the heels of a break in and beating that left an elderly woman in Toledo dead, self defense experts have a tip that could save your life. Val Glinka teaches self-defense to students at Sylvania Southview High School . For decades, he's suggested putting a can of wasp and hornet spray near your door or bed. Glinka says, "This is better than anything I can teach them." Glinka considers it inexpensive, easy to find, and more effective than mace or pepper spray. The cans typically shoot 20 feet; so if someone tries to break into your home, Glinka says "spray the culprit in the eyes". It's a tip he's given to students for decades. It's also one he wants everyone to hear. If you're looking for protection, Glinka says look to the spray. "That's going to give you a chance to call the police; maybe get out." Maybe even save a life.

Please share this with all the people who are precious to your life.

Did you also know that wasp spray will kill a snake? And a mouse! It will! Good to know, huh? It will also kill a wasp!!! And best of all, immobilize a human.

[Note: I would amend this article to clarify for the secretary who kept a can on her desk; I would also advise her to have an 8" X 10" picture in a frame on her desk – and the can behind that and not visible to anyone who comes into the office. She would know where it was and could easily reach it in an instant, but the visitor would not know it was there. It is also good to have a can in a lady's purse or for a guy in a tote bag that is carried over the shoulder. Finally, I would recommend having several at home – in the kitchen, in the living room, and of course, in your bedroom; each one should be behind some other object so that a visitor would not be readily able to see it. I am retired Army, have fired "Expert" with various weapons to include a pistol, and am trained in the "martial arts" of Japanese Judo and Korean Karate – but I strongly recommend this as a preferred type of self-defense. Regardless of how proficient you may be with a weapon, you can get nervous and miss; to use a baseball bat to defend oneself is relatively ineffective. With wasp spray, if someone attacks, you can spray his eyes in a sustained stream that can blind him temporarily and give you time to get away and call the police. I have recommended this to several people I know. This is an especially effective "equalizer" for women who are on average not as strong physically as a man is. This is also an inexpensive means of self-defense. – AOM]

+ *Statement on Johnson and Johnson COVID 19 Vaccine*. Concerns raised on use of abortion-related cells by Catholics

WASHINGTON – On March 2, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Doctrine, and Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City in Kansas, chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Pro-Life Activities, issued a statement on the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine recently approved for use in the United States. "The approval of

Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine for use in the United States again raises questions about the moral permissibility of using vaccines developed, tested, and/or produced with the help of abortion-derived cell lines.... Pfizer and Moderna's vaccines raised concerns because an abortion-derived cell line was used for testing them, but not in their production. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, however, was developed, tested and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines raising additional moral concerns....”

– Jacki Ragan, Director, State Organizational Development, National Right to Life Committee, Alexandria, VA 22314

+ ***Vaccine after-effects.*** The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also drew up a document last fall listing the possible side-effects from experimental COVID-19 vaccines, including strokes, encephalitis, auto-immune disease, birth defects, Kawasaki disease, and death. Current reports on the CDC's VAERS reporting system reveal that “between Dec. 14, 2020, and Feb. 26, a total of 25,212 total adverse events were reported to VAERS, including 1,265 deaths and 4,424 serious injuries.” Of the total, “31% of the deaths occurred within 48 hours of vaccination, and 47% of deaths occurred in people who became ill within 48 hours of being vaccinated.” – “News from The FDA”; Date: Mar 13, 2021 4:11 PM.

+ ***CDC Ignores Inquiry Into Increasing Number of Deaths, Injuries Reported After COVID Vaccines.***

[Note: The statistics in this article differ from those of the FDA above; I trust this information as more accurate. – AOM]

VAERS data released today showed 38,444 reports of adverse events following COVID vaccines, including 1,739 deaths and 6,286 serious injuries since Dec. 14, 2020. Data released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the number of injuries and deaths reported to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) following COVID vaccines showed 38,444 reports of adverse events since Dec. 14, 2020. On March 8, *The Defender* contacted the CDC with questions about how the agency is investigating reports of deaths and injuries after COVID vaccines. We provided a written list of questions asking the status of investigations on deaths reported in the media, if autopsies are being done, the standard for determining whether an injury is causally connected to a vaccine and the known issues with VAERS – namely whether healthcare providers are reporting all injuries and deaths that might be connected to the COVID vaccine, and what education initiatives are in place to encourage and facilitate proper and accurate reporting. We asked for a reply within two days. As of today, 11 days later, the CDC has not answered our questions. Instead, when we call them, they respond saying, “they have received our email, they will escalate it and it is in the system.” When we asked if we could speak with the person reviewing the email, we were told that information could not be provided. When we emailed them to follow up, we received no response.

Every Friday, VAERS makes public all vaccine injury reports received by the system as of Friday of the previous week. The 38,444 adverse events reported between Dec. 14, 2020, and March 11 include 1,739 deaths and 6,286 serious injuries. This week's (3/11/2021) data included reports of 478 cases of Bell's Palsy. Of those, 66% of cases were reported after Pfizer-BioNTech vaccinations – almost twice as many as reported (36%) following vaccination with the Moderna vaccine. The first Johnson & Johnson (J&J) COVID vaccine was administered in the U.S. on March 2. As of March 11, nine anaphylactic reactions associated with J&J's vaccine had been reported to VAERS. As *The Defender* reported earlier this month, the J&J vaccine contains polysorbate 80, known to trigger allergic reactions, The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines contain polyethylene glycol (PEG), also known to trigger anaphylactic reactions.

In the U.S., 98.2 million COVID vaccine doses had been administered as of March 11.

VAERS is the primary mechanism for reporting adverse vaccine reactions in the U.S. Reports submitted to VAERS require further investigation before a causal relationship can be confirmed. This week's VAERS data show: Of the 1,739 deaths reported as of March 11, 30% occurred within 48 hours of vaccination, 21% occurred within 24 hours, and 46% occurred in people who became ill within 48 hours of being vaccinated. By comparison, during the same period, there were only 85 deaths reported following flu vaccines. Nineteen percent of deaths were related to cardiac disorders. Fifty-three percent of those who died were male, 44% were

female and the remaining death reports did not include gender of the deceased. The average age of those who died was 77.9 and the youngest death was an 18-year-old.

As of March 11, 289 pregnant women had reported adverse events related to COVID vaccines, including 90 reports of miscarriage or premature birth. None of the COVID vaccines approved for Emergency Use Authorization has been confirmed safe or effective for pregnant women, although J&J said earlier this month it would begin testing on pregnant women, infants and the immunocompromised. There were 1,689 reports of anaphylaxis, with 59% of cases attributed to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and 41% to Moderna. The average age of death reported remains 77.9, however the youngest reported death this week dropped from 23 to 18. According to VAERS, the teenager developed fatigue, body aches and a headache one day after receiving the Moderna vaccine on March 3. On March 5 he complained of chest pain, and died in his sleep later that day. The latest data also includes the report of a 22-year-old woman with a “significant, lifelong underlying medical condition” who died 24 days after the vaccine.

According to the CDC’s website, “the CDC follows up on any report of death to request additional information and learn more about what occurred and to determine whether the death was a result of the vaccine or unrelated.” To date, the only information the CDC has published related to the investigation of COVID vaccine-related deaths and how those investigations were conducted is a COVID-19 Vaccine Safety Update via the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) published on Jan. 27. The safety update analyzed only the 198 reported deaths that occurred within the first month after the first COVID vaccine was administered in the U.S. It is unknown whether the CDC has investigated any of the 1,541 reported deaths since or, if investigations were conducted, what the results showed.

On March 16, *The Defender* reported that more than 20 countries suspended use of AstraZeneca’s COVID vaccine after reports of blood clots, some resulting in death, in healthy people who received the vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) said an ongoing analysis by its vaccines advisory committee had not established a causal link between the vaccine and blood clots and that countries should keep using it.

On March 18, the European Medicine Agency (EMA) released the results of its investigation into the AstraZeneca vaccine. The EMA said Thursday the vaccine “may be associated with very rare cases of blood clots,” but the agency still considers it to be “safe and effective” and countries should continue to use it. The EMA determined AstraZeneca’s vaccine was not associated with an “overall risk” of blood clots in those vaccinated and there was no evidence of a problem related to specific batches of the vaccine or manufacturing sites, *The Defender* reported.

According to Reuters, about a dozen countries resumed use of AstraZeneca’s COVID vaccine, including Germany, Indonesia and France as EU and British regulators said the benefits outweighed any risks of potential blood clots. AstraZeneca’s vaccine is not yet approved for emergency use in the U.S.

On March 18, *The Defender* reported Pfizer’s chief financial officer told analysts and investors during a recent earnings call that the company plans to turn its COVID vaccine with German company BioNTech into an even bigger cash cow once the pandemic ends [original wording]. Pfizer’s vaccine is already the second-highest revenue-generating drug in the world. The vaccine maker expects revenues of \$15 billion in 2021 based on current contracts for its COVID vaccine, but that number could double as Pfizer says it can potentially deliver 2 billion doses this year.

Leaked documents obtained as a result of a cyberattack on the EMA and reviewed by The BMJ revealed regulators had major concerns over unexpectedly low quantities of intact mRNA in batches of the Pfizer’s COVID vaccine developed for commercial production, as reported this week by *The Defender*. A leaked email identified “a significant difference in % RNA integrity/truncated species” between the clinical batches and proposed commercial batches – from around 78% to 55%. Pfizer was not manufacturing vaccines to the specifications expected, and the impact of this loss of RNA integrity on safety and efficacy of the vaccine was not identified, according to the email. The EMA responded by filing two “major objections” with Pfizer, along with a host of other questions it wanted addressed. It’s unclear if the agency’s concerns were satisfied.

– Megan Redshaw, *The Defender*; Children’s Health Defense Organization. Taken from Vaers data.

**A Way Forward/“General Conference 2021” (now GC2022).**

+ The Commission on General Conference and the Council of Bishops announced decisions impacting the meeting of the already-delayed 2020 General Conference. Citing the on-going realities of the pandemic, the slow progress of vaccine distribution around the world, and the challenges posed by travel restrictions for international delegates, the Commission announced that the regular General Conference session delayed until Fall 2021 will be pushed back again to August 29–September 6, 2022 in Minneapolis and hoped for a Special Session of the General Conference scheduled to meet virtually on May 8, 2021. In a meeting on March 22<sup>nd</sup> the Council of Bishops decided that they would cancel the May 8<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the General Conference. Instead, they will use their April meeting to discuss findings from “listening sessions” and will formulate a new timeline leading up to the “General Conference 2020” set for August 29<sup>th</sup> to September 2022.

– Multiple sources: United Methodist News Service (UMNS), Rev. Maidstone Mulenga, COB Dir. of Communications.

***+ Challenges of a virtual General Conference.***

BROOKFIELD, Wis. – David W. Scott addresses the challenges of a virtual, or as he prefers to call it, a “distributed” General Conference. Those include lack of access to reliable, high-bandwidth internet, he writes in UM & Global, the blog he curates for United Methodist Professors of Mission. His latest post includes links to earlier essays in which he considers the consequences if the denomination’s lawmaking assembly is again postponed. [Note: It was. – AOM]

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*What Would a Distributed General Conference Look Like?* Since this blog raised the question of what happens if General Conference does not meet in 2021 [Note: It won’t. – AOM], that...has been much discussed in a variety of contexts, including a UMNS article and a Connectional Table interview of Bishop Thomas Bickerton. The Commission on General Conference has named a “Technology Study Team” to explore online participation in the next General Conference.

Much of the discussion about possibilities for General Conference 2021 is whether the event could become “virtual.” However, I would like to suggest that most Americans’ understanding of a “virtual” event do not fit with what a technology-assisted GC2021 would actually look like. A much better way of thinking about that possibility is to talk about a “distributed” GC2021. For those in the United States, the term “virtual” connotes Zoom meetings or other online events where each individual participates from their own home, office, or home office. Virtual schooling, virtual church, virtual work have all operated on this model of individual participation in technology-mediated online meetings, where each person has an internet device and is in a separate location from others. The problem with this model in many parts of the world is that individuals do not have reliable, high-bandwidth access to the Internet in their homes or even offices. Thus, a General Conference delegate from Mulungwishi, the Democratic Republic (DR) Congo is unlikely to be able to Zoom into General Conference while sitting on a couch in [his] living room, even if a delegate from Memphis, Tennessee could. This does not, however, mean that the Internet is completely unavailable in DR Congo or other developing nations. In almost every country, the Internet is accessible somewhere, usually in urban areas and/or hotels and conference centers that cater to global business travelers and NGOs. Thus, for delegates from such countries to participate in an online General Conference would probably mean gathering these delegates at a central point or central points, where they could then access the meeting through the reliable internet of whatever facility in which they were meeting. Several African commentators suggest such a possibility in the UMNS piece “Should General Conference go virtual?” Thus, an online General Conference would not be virtual in the sense of each delegate accessing the event individually; it would be distributed in the sense of there being multiple sites at which General Conference delegates gather, with each site linked through technology, but not necessarily each delegate on an individual internet device.

Such a distributed model of General Conference would probably be necessary to ensure access for delegates from many countries in Africa and perhaps parts of the Philippines. It also probably makes some issues like translation a bit easier, or at least no harder. Nevertheless, it also raises some issues and challenges.

1. It is technologically more complicated to ensure participation if not every delegate has a personal device to access the internet. Would delegates at the distributed points each be provided with devices to access the online event? Would the event be live streamed on a single screen? If it is live streamed, how could individual delegates interact with the proceedings? 2. There are logistical/procedural challenges to having delegates from multiple different group locations participate in an online event. How would sessions be scheduled to accommodate different time zones? How would raising questions or making comments work? Could or how could committees function if their members are in multiple different locations without access to individual internet devices? How would votes be tabulated if not every delegate has their own internet device? 3. There are issues of relationship building and trust. Many General Conference decisions are made not because of what happens in the plenary session but because of the conversations that happen on the margins of the meeting--over meals and in hallways. If delegates are still having such conversations, but only with others from their geographic area, how does that change the approach to decision-making? Especially in the light of possible voting irregularities in GC2019, how do distributed sites retain trust in what is happened at other sites when there is less central verification of processes, procedures, credentials, etc.?

Thus, while holding a distributed General Conference might be a logistical necessity to ensure equitable access to an online event, it is by no means an easy or simple solution, and it poses a variety of challenges. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the Technology Study Team or the Commission on General Conference itself might conclude that an online General Conference is simple not feasible and, despite the challenges associated with not having a General Conference, conclude that further delaying General Conference is still the best option.

Part I: Denominational Division. Politico recently published a piece entitled “Here’s How the Pandemic Finally Ends.” The piece, which is based on interviews with a large number of epidemiologists, is predominantly focused on the United States, though it includes some thoughts on the rest of the world toward the end. Two passages are worth lifting up: First, “this is how it could happen in the United States: By November 2021, most Americans have received two doses of a vaccine that, while not gloriously effective, fights the disease in more cases than not. Meanwhile, Americans continue to wear masks and avoid large gatherings.” Second, “[Zeke] Emanuel anticipates countries opening up international travel as they get and deploy vaccines, but that “it’s going to take a couple or three years to really get ... a full return to pre-Covid normalcy” in international travel.”

Taken together, these two insights – that large gatherings in the US may not happen until late in 2021 and international travel may be difficult until 2022 or 2023 – indicate that there is a real possibility that a 2020 General Conference delayed to late August/early September of 2021 will still not be possible. Such a gathering may need to be delayed longer, and in an extreme case, may not happen until the regularly scheduled General Conference in 2024.

What would this mean for the church if General Conference 2020/2021 does not happen? [Note: It won’t. – AOM]

The United Methodist Church is in many ways set up to function without regular input from General Conference. After all, even normally, the body only meets once every four years. The denomination could certainly go a bit longer without an updated Book of Resolutions or updated hymnal, and it would be fine. Even some improvements which would be nice to have could wait, and things could run as they have in the meantime. But General Conference is still necessary to fix immediate problems in the denomination and to keep the machinery of the denomination running. In particular, General Conference 2020/2021 is important to address the issue of denominational division and to provide for the 3 B’s of Methodist bureaucracy: budgets, boards, and bishops.

With a further delayed General Conference, The United Methodist Church will need to figure out other avenues to address these two challenges.

Denominational Division. The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) has indicated that it is planning to leave the United Methodist Church no matter whether General Conference 2021 happens, and no matter what happens at General Conference 2021 if it does happen. Their intention to form a new denomination has been clearly

stated, planning for the new denomination has continued to proceed even amid the pandemic, and the groundwork for the new denomination is now already well laid. At the beginning of 2020, it looked like the WCA would leave as part of a grand deal struck among US Traditionalists, centrists, and progressives, with leadership from the central conferences. This deal was embodied in the Protocol for Reconciliation through Separation and Grace, a legislative proposal for General Conference 2020. But without a General Conference, there is no Protocol. The Protocol offers the WCA two things: rhetorical cover for leaving the denomination without seeming like they lost the fight [emphasis added] and \$25 million. The train of WCA withdrawal may be far enough out of the station that the first consideration is no longer necessary, and given the terrible state of denominational finances, it is likely that the WCA realizes that the \$25 million may not actually be available. Thus, they may decide that whatever amount is available is not be worth waiting around for.

If the Protocol does not happen, it raises questions about how the WCA will leave the UMC. There are long-standing provisions for local churches to leave the denomination, and General Conference 2019 created a new provision (Paragraph 2553) for departures, though the status of that paragraph is somewhat in question due to voting irregularities at General Conference 2019. Less clear is the ability of annual conferences, either in the United States or elsewhere around the world, to unilaterally leave the denomination without action of General Conference. Does the WCA leave as a series of local churches, or do some annual conferences decide to unilaterally depart? At stake is a series of potential lawsuits, if those remaining in the UMC decide they are worth bringing.

The WCA has made clear their intent to be a global denomination. What then happens in the Central Conferences? Russia, for instance, would likely want to leave en masse. Again, does this happen unilaterally, or is there an attempt to go through the (much slower) BOD-provided means for a central conference becoming autonomous, which require eventual General Conference action. What happens elsewhere in Eastern Europe, where attitudes on sexuality are conservative, but ties to Western Europe are important? Europeans were likely to resolve these issues themselves, but do they decide not to wait for General Conference to do their own restructuring? It is possible that entire annual conferences depart in some places in Africa (perhaps Liberia, for instance), but in many other areas (the Congo, for instance), it seems that the bishops are trying to resist efforts to leave the denomination. Divisions are likely, but local divisions in the UMC in various African nations have happened before without most people at General Conference even being aware of them.

Restructuring the Remaining United Methodist Church. If the WCA leaves before a postponed GC, that also means the Protocol becomes unnecessary when General Conference does finally meet. Thus, if denominational division happens before a postponed General Conference can meet, the most important piece of legislation facing such a General Conference would not be the by-then irrelevant Protocol, but the Christmas Covenant, which would remain a vital component for restructuring the remaining UMC on a more equitable basis. In that regard, it would be interesting to see whether those promoting the Christmas Covenant and the US as a Regional Conference, which are similar but not identical packages of legislation, would continue to work in harmony, as the Connectional Table has thus far implied, or whether these two plans would come to be seen as competing versions of regional restructuring. The Christmas Covenant is likely to have better support outside the US, and thus it is the more likely vision to win out. Of course, it is difficult to predict what the political forces at work in a post-separation without the Protocol United Methodist Church would look like two or three years from now. Still, the Christmas Covenant should be required reading for those thinking about the future of the denomination. The rest we will have to wait and see.

Part II: Budgets, Boards, and Bishops. As explained, if the General Conference delayed to August/September of 2021 may not happen, this further postponement would raise significant questions about how the denomination will address pressing problems and keep the machinery of the denomination running. This piece will examine what a further delayed General Conference would mean for denominational budgets, boards, and bishops.

Budgets. General Conference sets the denomination's quadrennial budget, and this power is reserved to this body. Other groups, especially GCFA and the Connectional Table, have a role in proposing a budget to General Conference, and GCFA has a good deal of authority to administer apportionment money and set payout rates

based on the budget, but General Conference makes the budget. No General Conference in 2021 means no updated budget for the denomination.

It is easy enough to roll over current budgets, and GCFA has indicated that they will continue to operate based on the previous quadrennium's budget until General Conference convenes in 2021, though they recognized that this decision was taken on shaky authority. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons (membership declines, denominational division, the pandemic, the economy) the UMC's budget going forward will need to be different and smaller than the previous quadrennium's budget. What then happens in this situation? Does the UMC continue to operate based on percentages of the 2016–2020 budget, since that was the last one approved, even if it does not reflect the financial realities of the church? This would impose proportional cuts on all budget lines. Or is there some move to try to prioritize within these cuts? If so, who will have the authority to make these difficult decisions?

Boards. Board members for most denominational boards and agencies are chosen following General Conference, though not directly by it. General Conference does appoint members to certain denominational committees, such as the Judicial Council, University Senate, and study commissions. For now, these boards, agencies, and committees have asked their members from last quadrennium to continue to serve until new members can be elected following General Conference 2021. But that becomes more difficult the longer the situation endures, especially if denominational division happens in the meantime. If people are no longer United Methodist, they are presumably no longer serving on United Methodist boards, agencies, or committees. Even for those who remain United Methodist, life circumstances may change in a way that prohibits members from continuing to serve. In some cases, changed life circumstances (new jobs, retirement, shifted family responsibilities) may make some members unwilling to continue to serve. In other more severe instances, circumstances (death, major illness) may make some members unable to continue to serve. Boards typically have some amount of fluctuation in membership, and in normal times, they are set up to handle that fluctuation. But if a significant portion of the membership of the board does not continue, that can raise issues that impact the board's ability to function, including quorum, officers, etc. Especially if responding to significant budget reductions or selecting new leadership, a fully functioning board can be quite important to an organization. Boards and agencies are likely to not wait indefinitely to replenish their membership if needed, even if this means departing from convention. Full membership is potentially quite important for the Judicial Council as well. Although there are alternates for the Judicial Council, it is still possible that the Council could end up short of members before the next General Conference. And if there are significant judicial issues surrounding denominational division, it would be very important to have a fully functional Judicial Council. The alternative is that judicial review becomes less significant in the denomination.

Bishops. General Conference does not elect bishops (at least not anymore.) But Jurisdictional and Central Conferences, which do elect bishops, are set to happen after General Conference. No General Conference likely means no Jurisdictional or Central Conferences. Jurisdictional and Central Conferences may also face the same sorts of pandemic-related restrictions that could scuttle GC2021. If Jurisdictional and Central Conferences are further postponed, it raises questions for bishops' tenure and replacement. In most instances, active bishops have agreed to postpone their retirement and continue to serve through 2022, when successors elected at delayed Jurisdictional and Central Conferences could begin their terms. But bishops may not be willing to do the same until 2023 or 2024. And some active bishops may leave with the WCA. This may leave episcopal vacancies. How would they be filled? Would remaining bishops then cover expanded territories? Would bishops be called back out of retirement? Alternatively, significant numbers of churches in an episcopal area might leave with the WCA, leaving a bishop supervising a much smaller number of remaining churches. How could episcopal areas be reconfigured without Jurisdictional or Central Conferences to do so?

The upshot is that a further delayed General Conference may have a significant impact on the extent and quality of episcopal leadership in the denomination over the next four years.

Two Takeaways. On all of these issues, and on issues surrounding denominational division, authority and leadership will be devolved to lower levels of the denomination, whether that is individual churches deciding to leave with the WCA, GCFA and the Connectional Table making budget decisions, boards and agencies deciding how to fill board vacancies, or district superintendents stepping up to cover some duties during



episcopal transitions. As part of this trend, local churches will probably have to get along with less support from the denomination at a time when they are already under great strain from the pandemic. Many pastors may decide to retire early or leave ministry as a result.

The corollary of this devolution of leadership is that not just General Conference, but the Book of Discipline will be undercut as a source of authority. The Book of Discipline did not anticipate and made no provision for many of the extraordinary circumstances in which the church now finds itself. That means that people will need to find ways to run the church in the next couple of years that skirt around or, in some cases, flat out ignore what the Book of Discipline says. A Judicial Council hobbled by incomplete membership would be less able to resist this trend. Once the Book of Discipline becomes something that can be ignored in certain circumstances, though, a precedent has been set. It will become easier to ignore the Book of Discipline in the future, even under less dire circumstances.

That scenario of a diminished Book of Discipline is likely unavoidable. But it is another sign that, even when things return to “normal” post-pandemic, it will no longer be business as usual as it was before the pandemic. We – individuals, churches, and as a denomination – will bear the impacts of the present pandemic on us for a long time to come.

– David W. Scott. Dr. Scott is a Mission Theologian at the General Board of Global Ministries.

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It is never too late to do the right thing. ~ Anonymous, as quoted by Allen Morris