

Behind the Scenes: A Document Concerning the 1968 Union

Editor's Introduction by Milton Loyer, 2004

What you are about to read is such an amazing piece of United Methodist memorabilia that it merits a special introduction. In this issue of *The Chronicle* devoted to material relating to the various denominational separations and unions that have resulted in the United Methodist Church, this article stands alone in its significance beyond the Central Pennsylvania Conference – not only because of its content and its authorship, but also because of its apparent rarity and the possible “disappearance” of the document to which it refers.

The Central Pennsylvania Conference archives, as most other United Methodist depositories, possesses 3 versions of the *Plan of Union* for the proposed 1968 union between the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren denominations. They may be described as follows.

- (1) A small booklet with 3 parts (historical statement, enabling legislation, constitution) prepared for the April 1964 Methodist and October 1966 EUB General Conferences.
- (2) A large book with 4 parts (constitution, doctrinal statements and general rules, social principals, organization and administration) prepared for the November 1966 General Conferences in Chicago.
- (3) A slightly modified version of #2 prepared for the 1968 Uniting Session in Dallas.

Apparently there was an earlier *Plan of Union* version that raised a few eyebrows because among other things it proposed (as a Methodist-EUB compromise) that the episcopal appointment of district superintendents be subject to approval by the annual conference [article IX under Episcopal Supervision]. The article that follows is a November 1963 reaction paper to that *Plan* by Bishop Fred Pierce Corson. While it seems almost inconceivable, we have been unable to locate a copy of that early *Plan*. Even the national archives at Madison NJ and the EUB heritage Center at Dayton OH have the same 3 documents described above, but not the earlier version.

Fred Pierce Corson (1896-1985) was born in Millville NJ and graduated from Dickinson College in 1917 and Drew Theological Seminary in 1920. He was ordained in the New York East Conference and served as pastor and district superintendent before becoming president of Dickinson College in 1934. It was from that position that he was elected to the office of bishop at the 1944 Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference. He was assigned to the Philadelphia Area, where he remained as bishop until his retirement in 1968 – a feat not possible in today's United Methodist Church. A respected churchman, he served as president of the Methodist Council of Bishops for the United States and president of the World Methodist Council, and he represented Methodism in several key ecumenical roles.

Bishop Corson was known as a strong bishop – as seen in the document that follows, for example, by his desire for bishops to have the authority to transfer pastors to other Conferences. Many of his most critical comments on the proposed *Plan of Union* were directed to changes that he thought would weaken the office of bishop – which carried less authority and responsibility in the EUB denomination than it did in the Methodist Church. In particular, district superintendents in the Methodist Church were appointed by the bishops while their counterparts in the EUB denomination were elected by the annual conference. As a compromise measure, the original version of the *Plan of Union* proposed that the district superintendents be appointed by the bishop subject to the approval of the annual conference.

Apparently supporters of the original *Plan* made an analogy between the Cabinet (i.e., the district superintendents) of a bishop and the Cabinet of the President of the United States. At the federal level, the President appoints his Cabinet subject to approval by the U.S. Senate – why shouldn't this time-tested sharing of authority and system of checks and balances work as well in the new United Methodist Church? As Bishop Corson's comments reveal, however, he saw this as erosion of the bishop's authority and a direct attack on the entire appointment system that had been a cornerstone of Methodism from the very beginning. In addition, he found the idea that lay people should participate in such a decision to be totally unacceptable – not regarding, I assume, the fact that lay people had a vote in his election to the episcopacy in the first place!

There is no mention in any of the subsequent surviving versions of the *Plan of Union* of the appointment of district superintendents requiring approval by the annual conference. How much weight the opinion of Bishop Corson played in that decision cannot be determined. Until such time as further minutes or informal notes, or even a copy of the original proposed *Plan of Union*, are discovered, one can only speculate on what went on behind the scenes to produce the *Plan of Union* that was eventually distributed to the public.

Bishop Corson's papers are housed in the historical center at Lake Junaluska NC. A search of this material has also failed to produce the earlier *Plan of Union* – or even a copy of his printed November 1963 reaction. Part of the mystery is that we don't know how widely either the early *Plan* or the response of Bishop Corson was distributed. Several persons still living who may have been in positions to see an early version of the *Plan of Union* have no recollection of such a document, and so the possibility remains that the *Plan* in question was a draft distributed only among the original committee members who were preparing it – and that Bishop Corson obtained a copy of that draft and was directing his comments to those on the committee.

Since the bishop refers to various portions of the *Plan* without actually giving the exact words, we assume his reactions were directed to persons who had access to the original *Plan*. Admittedly, this adds a level of confusion for those of us seeing only the reaction. But rather than present footnotes or other explanations that would interrupt the flow the paper and “second guess” both

Bishop Corson's reasoning and the exact content of the original *Plan*, we present the material just as it was distributed in 1963. We hope that some future researcher will discover the missing document and prepare a more formal, annotated paper on Bishop Corson's "first thoughts."

First Thoughts on Reading "Plan of Union" by Fred Pierce Corson, 1963

My first thought was the realization that I would not be administering the plan of union since its proposed effective date coincides with the date of my retirement. This fact, I feel, has helped me to look at the plan more objectively than I might have done had I been involved in the administration of its provisions.

My approach is sympathetic. I desire union when and if it makes a stronger and more effective Church. But I have sought to appraise the plan in the light of my experience and the history of our Church, as well as the projection of its provisions in their application to the current and future church life. And because of our responsibility for the future of Methodism, what is best, rather than what is easiest, should be our measure of approval or disapproval.

DIVISION ONE

THE NAME. The name "THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH" is descriptive of union, but in this instance not of Methodism, since the union involves other than Methodist churches. It would have been more appropriate for the union of the three bodies of Methodism in 1939. However, the proposed name, to me, offers no difficulties. There is a fundamental question of far-reaching significance which should be answered in this paragraph: Is this union a new Church or a merger of EUB with the Methodist Church.

ARTICLES OF RELIGION AND CONFESSION OF FAITH. These should mean more than an historical statement if the Church holds to a theology and has beliefs. I do not have the EUB statement of "Articles," but I presume that both the Methodist and EUB articles have been carefully studied and found to be substantially identical. Otherwise the inclusion of both would be a contradiction which would cancel out a definite statement of theological belief and therefore be meaningless.

DIVISION TWO - ORGANIZATION

LOCAL CONFERENCE. If this is a substitute for "Quarterly Conference," it is more descriptive and better.

GENERAL CONFERENCE. The proposal to increase the number of delegates in the General Conference to 1200 will, I think, call for justification in light of the fact that the Methodist Church has so recently rejected this proposal. The bonus in delegates given to the EUB membership – two for the Methodist's one on a proportional basis – may add as many as 200 additional delegates. The

argument for holding to 900 or less was in the interest of keeping the General Conference a truly legislative body. This reason should not be forgotten.

Rule 10 on page 3 of the printed Plan specifies a “uniform basis” for the election of bishops by the Jurisdictional Conference. This, of course, is necessary. In effect, however, it means when for special reasons one Jurisdiction may need an additional bishop, in order to grant it all the other Jurisdictions must be granted one. This happened in 1960.

RESTRICTIVE RULES. I will comment later of the restrictive rule formerly No. 2, and now No. 3 in the proposed Constitution.

It seems to me that the provision of Article IV as a restrictive rule is first of all misplaced. This is a provision for temporary concession and differs in that respect from the restrictive rules which presuppose the permanent inclusion in the Constitution. This article, along with the two statements of the articles on faith, the two rituals, the two hymnals, and the perpetuation of the identity of the two Churches to the extent of retaining intact their separate Conferences, recognizes the principle of parallelism or union by a side-by-side participation. I do not object to this so long as it is consistently applied. We must, however, recognize that in preferential representation on Boards, etc., we are establishing a precedent that could justify similar preferential treatment to Jurisdictions. The inclusion of this preferential treatment, as a requirement on the Annual Conference level, will create difficulties. What, for instance, shall be the percentage of former EUB ministers in a former Methodist Conference to be considered practical for the application of this rule.

Section III has been omitted, possibly by a typographical error.

Section IV – JURISDICTIONAL CONFERENCES. This section follows largely the Methodist constitutional provisions for Jurisdictional Conferences. Article II should recognize the preferential treatment stipulated for EUB Conferences in the matter of the ratio representation in all Jurisdictional Conferences.

Since a new Constitution is being proposed, I wish that provision could be made to rectify what I consider to be two serious deficiencies in the present one. One is the denial of participation by an Annual Conference in determining its boundaries. Churches are given some measure of self-determination in voting on a change of Conference and Jurisdiction, and Jurisdictions are likewise given a measure of self-determination in the settlement of their boundaries. The Annual Conference has no voice in fixing its boundaries. It is subject to the Jurisdictional Conference solely in this respect. A Jurisdictional Conference would vote to sever and deplete an Annual Conference, and the Annual Conference would have no redress. The legislation, as it is now written and has often been applied, seems to overlook the fact that primarily the Annual Conference is an organism and an entity, and not an organization or a number of unrelated church units.

Secondly, if a Jurisdictional Conference has the power to transfer churches from one Conference to another, constitutional provision should restore the power of bishops to transfer preachers from one Conference to another. Because a church is transferred from one Conference to another does not now carry with it

the automatic transfer of the pastor of that church (see Judicial Council Decision #114). The result could be a number of churches transferred to a Conference with a much lower annuity rate and other disadvantages, and most of the preachers in those churches electing to remain in their Conference with its greater advantage. This possible dilemma should be resolved by law.

Section V – CENTRAL CONFERENCES. This section is essentially the same as in the present Methodist Constitution.

Section VI – EPISCOPAL ADMINISTRATION IN CENTRAL CONFERENCES. This section make a change which, I think, is consistent with our concept of the general itinerancy of our episcopacy by stating in Article V that a bishop assigned to visit a Central Conference “shall” be recognized, etc., and “may” – eliminating the words “upon the request of the majority of bishops in the Central Conferences” – exercise the functions of the episcopacy.

Section VII – THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE. On first reading, I notice no essential changes. However, I have been told that special permission to permit EUB Conferences to elect their delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conferences by the method now followed – a joint vote and not a vote by orders – is under sympathetic consideration.

DIVISION THREE – EPISCOPAL SUPERVISION

Article I. Since the episcopacy is to be of like plan, powers, privileges and duties of both Churches, has a study been made by students of constitutional canon law to determine if “episcopacy” which restrictive rule No. 2 in the proposed Constitution says cannot be “done away” is identical in meaning as well as action in both Churches? And in Article II, is the consecration of bishops identical in both Churches as to meaning and involvement? The Methodist form of consecration is essentially Anglican.

Article IV. Methodist Church law has established the right of bishops to fix the Area boundaries. Since authority to fix boundaries, as applied to Conference and Jurisdictions, is fixed by constitutional provision in the proposed Constitution, should not this provision be safeguarded in the Constitution for the reasons already given in law?

Article V. In the second paragraph the words “not to exceed a year” should, in my judgment, be eliminated and the sentence should read “for presidential or other temporary service.” This would give our system a safe flexibility which would answer some criticisms now directed against the restrictions upon crossing Jurisdictional lines for episcopal service.

Article VI. When EUB bishops join the Jurisdictions, are they to be counted in the present membership quota or are they in addition to it? Unless they come in addition to the quota some Jurisdictions will, in all probability, be presented with a legal impasse or with no possibility of filling their vacancies created by retirements.

Article IX. The election of District Superintendents, as provided for in this article, is the point of greatest departure from the historic Methodist

administrative and appointment procedures. Since this is the fact and since the future of the Church will largely be determined by the Constitution finally adopted for it, the most thorough and careful study of its meaning and effect, as well as the conditions which prompted this proposal and the history of such a proposal in the Methodist Church, should be made. We want union, but we also have a responsibility for the future effectiveness of the Church.

We should, therefore, understand fully the meaning of the proposed provision that “they should be appointed by the bishop with the consent of the Annual Conference when first appointed.” For either a decision for this or against it, we should know what it involves. Actually it constitutes an election of District Superintendents by granting to the Annual Conference the power of veto. It also invades the appointive power of the episcopacy which from the beginning the Church has placed solely in the episcopal branch. In the 1939 Uniting Conference and in five General Conferences, this proposal of a mixture of congregational and pastoral assent to episcopal appointment was thoroughly considered and rejected as not in the best interests of both preachers and the churches.

In its proposed form it restricts the bishop to nominating and announcing the appointment of a District Superintendent. The actual determination of the appointment resides in the Annual Conference. My studies lead me to the conclusion that such a provision which establishes the right of the Annual Conference to make appointments, but puts the responsibility for every minister’s appointment upon the bishop, does away with episcopacy in the Methodist meaning of this term. And unless this term “episcopacy” means Methodist episcopacy as conceived and confirmed by the Church from the beginning, it has no meaning. To do away with episcopacy does not mean Anglican episcopacy or Presbyterian episcopacy or Congregational episcopacy or episcopacy as abstractly interpreted by British Methodism. Methodist episcopacy resides in the power to appoint as a necessary provision for fulfilling all the other ministerial responsibilities which are assigned to the episcopacy.

Harmon, on page 21 in *The Organization of the Methodist Church*, says, “The peculiar power of the Methodist bishop and that which is the cornerstone of the superintendency has been his power to appoint men to their particular places of work... The bishop, and the bishop alone, has the right to say where each preacher shall preach.” He concludes that the appointive power is in the episcopacy and that Methodist episcopacy stands or falls in relation to its power to station preachers. This interpretation has never been successfully challenged in the history of the Methodist Church. This position has also been supported by Buckley, McTyier and Judge Wade.

When the episcopal power to appoint is invaded by constitutional enactment, it establishes the principle that the entire appointive powers can become subject to the same terms – for instance, a secretary of evangelism or of the Conference Board of Education. It should also be recalled that the decision to reserve to the bishops the powers of appointment was based on the best interests of the ministers and the churches, and not to retain a “special privilege” for the bishops.

The workability of every proposal cannot be determined in the abstract, but only as it is applied to a given situation. The EUB Church which has had the provision for the election of District Superintendents has also had an essentially different administrative situation to deal with. I have been told that nearly 50% of their Conferences have only one Superintendent, and that there is no limit to the tenure of a District Superintendent in office. Methodism has believed that the District Superintendents, if they were to do their work in the best interests of all, should be free from the political pressure of an election.

It is argued that the United States Senate approves the nominations of the President for his cabinet, therefore why should not an Annual Conference approve the appointment of a bishop's cabinet. There are two significant differences which make these procedures incompatible.

(1) A bishop has a responsibility for providing a place for his nominee if he is rejected.

(2) The United States Senate passes on the President's appointment by voice vote,

whereas under the proposed Constitution the vote may be by ballot – with all the actualities of political manipulation which experience indicates does happen.

To argue that to secure such approval is a pro-forma gesture has not always been true where the vote of the Conference has been required, and when the approval is not given the repercussions are serious and the adjustments are embarrassing.

To permit laymen in fact to control appointments by the power of the veto is to inject the "congregational" concept of the episcopacy into Methodist episcopacy. I doubt if under the present Constitution this is constitutional, and I also doubt that on a straight decision on this issue taken by itself that the Church would give it the necessary vote of approval.

There is also a practical fact of administration involved in this proposed change which we must not overlook. Quality in the superintendency has become the demand of our Methodism. Salaries have been fixed so that bishops can take the ablest and best qualified men for this work. With the increasing administrative responsibilities of bishops and the District Superintendents, the value of this policy is well established in the Church. But we must not overlook the requirements that have made the securing of this type of man for the superintendency possible. At present, the bishop can pick his man and seek his acceptance without the proviso that the Conference when it meets must vote on it. He can assure the man he offers the superintendency that when his term is up he can assure him of an equitable appointment which, if he is a good bishop, he works out as the first adjustment of his appointments. Under the proposed rule, all a bishop can say is that he will try to do this "if" – but there is always the possibility that the Conference can veto the arrangement, and this the bishop will not know and therefore cannot work on until Conference is in session. Men who are not self seeking and who are serving important places will hesitate before accepting the bishop's nomination under these circumstances.

I can fully understand the desire of the EUB Church to retain its practice in the appointment of District Superintendents, and I hope they will fully

appreciate the reasons why some of us feel so strongly that the Methodist method must for the sake of our Church be retained.

And since the principle of parallelism – two systems operating side by side – has been established in several instances in the proposed Constitution, why not make one other concession by allowing the bishops who preside over the EUB Conferences coming into the union and retaining their identity to arrive at their appointment of District Superintendents by the traditional methods of those Conferences. This would allow ten elevenths of the new Church to retain its method and one eleventh to retain theirs.

This does not need to be an “either-or” decision, but it could be “both-and.” It should be considered on all its judicial and administrative merits, even though all of us want to make amicable accommodations, if the best interests of the Church are to be furthered. It is my hope that this issue can be thus adjusted before the proposed Constitution reaches General Conference, where sincere members under deep conviction will feel called to challenge the present proposal.

DIVISION FOUR – THE JUDICIARY

This Division seems to be substantially the same as appears in the Methodist Constitution. There is one question, however, which concerns those who must make decisions of law. What, if any, will be the validity of the Judicial decisions made in connection with the present Constitution? Will they have any standing in law and, if not, will they have any force as precedents?

DIVISION FIVE – ADMINISTRATION

Article I. Providing for a General Council is new. Its nature, authority, function and powers should be carefully described before it is approved. To say simply “to coordinate the work of the United Methodist Church” is too indefinite and too broad, and it will involve the new Church in endless declaratory Judicial rulings. Likewise, the description of the work of the Annual Conference Council of Administration should be set forth.

Article II. This also is new. In the present Methodist Constitution, no mention is made of the Council on World Service and Finance. In the proposed Article II, the Council on World Service and Finance is confined to a receiving and disbursing agency “as provided by the General Conference.” At present it is very much more than that. In the new Constitution following “throughout the Church” these words should be added, “and shall have authority and responsibility to perform such functions as the General Conference shall direct.”

Conclusion

A workable plan of union resides, I believe, in the proposed Constitution with such modifications as will safeguard the best interests of both bodies. May these modifications be made before the instrument reaches the floor of the General Conference?

[signed] Fred Pierce Corson
November 1963