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COMMENTARY: Keep independence for UMC's finance council

Don House, Dec 8, 2011

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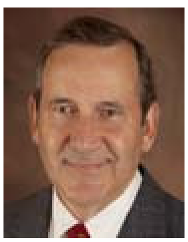
Special Contributor



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The legislation which has been submitted to General Conference by the Call to Action Steering Committee and the subsequent Interim Operations Team (IOT) is receiving considerable attention. Delegates, individually and collectively, are preparing for the upcoming debates at General Conference, which runs April 24-May 4, 2012, in Tampa, Fla.

The proposed legislation calls for a restructure of general agencies, councils and commissions into a corporate model. This model consists of a general secretary supervising up to four offices, responsible to a 15-member board. Members of that board would be appointed by a 45-member advisory committee. Four agencies would remain independent: United Methodist Men, United Methodist Women, the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits, and the United Methodist Publishing House.

Amendments to the IOT legislation, currently under construction, cover a variety of subjects including the composition of the 45-member advisory board, the role of the Council of Bishops, and the authority of any assigned committee to change the budget approved by the General Conference between sessions. No amendment to the IOT legislation is more important than that concerning the duties, responsibilities and authority of the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA).

Under the IOT legislation, the essential functions of GCFA would be transferred to a new Office of Shared Services—one of perhaps four offices under the supervision of the general secretary. These essential functions would be conducted under the authority of the head of the Office of Shared Services, who would report to the general secretary of the Center for Connectional Mission and Ministry, who would be responsible to the 15-member board of directors, and who would be advised by the 45-member advisory board. These functions would be supervised by multiple layers of governance. GCFA would no longer have direct communication with the General Conference.

Ensuring a balance

GCFA currently works independently. It works within the natural tension that exists between the local churches and their annual conferences on one hand, and the agencies, councils and commissions on the other. Local churches, which are the source of most funding, and annual conferences generally seek smaller general church apportioned budgets. Larger general church apportioned budgets mean larger apportionments for the annual conferences and to the local churches, leaving less for local mission and ministry at these levels of the connection.

General agencies, councils and commissions consistently seek larger budgets to fund their own mission and ministry. Local churches and annual conferences seek larger budgets to fund their own mission and ministry. The tension is healthy. It protects the interests of both sides while striking a proper balance.

GCFA recommends budgets to the General Conference only after projecting resulting apportionment payout rates. GCFA seeks to maintain and strengthen the finances of the local church and annual conference while meeting the essential needs for funding for the general agencies, councils and commissions. The projected payout rates are key to establishing the proper balance.

Under the proposed restructure, GCFA would lose its direct relationship and accountability to the General Conference. Its functions would be under the management of a general secretary who would supervise most mission and ministry of the general church.

Whether in reality, or merely in perception, the funding needs for mission and ministries of the general church would become the priority—at the expense of apportionment payout rates. Increases in apportionments, at least in part, would be attributed to the new structure.

My hope is that GCFA will remain an independent council—free to recommend the apportioned budget without direct supervision too closely linked to the funding needs for general church mission and ministry. The survival of the connection continues to depend upon a functioning apportionment system. Declining apportionment payout rates caused by aggressive growth in apportioned budgets will lead to a substantial weakening of the connection. At this time, this specific change is far too risky.

Mr. House is leader of the Texas Conference laity delegation to the 2012 General Conference and chairs the South Central Jurisdiction Episcopacy Committee. He's a board member of the Texas Methodist Foundation and chair of GCFA's economic advisory committee.