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Q&A: Why we don't have much time to save UMC

Sam Hodges, Feb 10, 2012



Don House

Don House is an influential figure in the UMC, chairing the Economic Advisory Committee of the General Council of Finance and Administration (GCFA) and South Central Jurisdiction Episcopacy Committee, and serving on the board of the Texas Methodist Foundation. A research economist and longtime member of A&M United Methodist Church in College Station, Texas, he also has been in a delegate to four General Conferences, and will be a delegate again in the 2012 General Conference, set for April 24-May 4 in Tampa, Fla.

Mr. House participated in the recent Pre-General Conference Briefing. There the Call to Action reform proposals—including restructuring of general church agencies, redirecting \$60 million in general church funds to boost the number of “vital congregations” and creating a “set-aside” bishop—were debated. During a break in that event, Mr. House shared insights and concerns with managing editor **Sam Hodges**. The exchange continued by email, and was edited into the following interview.

Is this General Conference, in the lead-up, different, given all the talk of restructuring and for other reform initiatives?

Usually when there's a very substantial proposed change in structure, it's dead before it gets there. When I say it's dead, I'm saying people are reasonably satisfied with the existing structure. This time, it's different. They (church leaders pushing for change) have convinced almost all of us—and I think they're right—that the existing structure is not satisfactory.

But what is being proposed is not acceptable to many. We heard this morning strong criticism of the proposed structure—torpedoes hitting the ship. The torpedoes this morning caused damage to the proposed legislation. Given such damage, how can one expect delegates to arrive at General Conference in April, repair the damage and present legislation that will pass? How do you repair the damage when you effectively have only three days for the legislative committee to perfect the legislation? That may be too much to ask.

My dream is that before we get to General Conference we perfect the legislation, repairing the damage, so that a new structure will be approved. My greatest fear is that we cannot agree and the existing structure remains in place.

Who has the biggest concerns?

Tim (McLendon; district superintendent in South Carolina) and others are addressing the balance of power—a balance between the episcopacy and the annual conferences. Although we all seek effective episcopal leadership

in our annual conferences, many see the proposed legislation as a departure from the historical balance of power in the work of the general Church that has to be preserved. The proposed legislation with a set-aside bishop could have unprecedented episcopal influence over the operations of the 15-member board with authority over the Center for Connectional Mission and Ministry as well as the operations of the 45-member General Council on Strategy and Oversight. (Editor's note: The new structure would bring most agencies under the Center for Connectional Mission and Ministry, which would answer to the General Council on Strategy and Oversight.) I think it's a legitimate concern.

You also have these special interests that are saying, "Wait, wait, wait. I have my favorite agency or commission—they represent my interests—and now it's going to be dumped into this big corporate structure and possibly be lost." Many representing these special interests are not supporting the proposed legislation.

You're concerned about GCFA not having autonomy under the new structure.

It is an easy fix. Take GCFA and pull it out of the Center for Connectional Mission and Ministry. I think that's what will happen. GCFA's most significant job is recommending to the General Conference the size of the apportioned budget for the general church. The proposed legislation assigns this job to Center for Connectional Ministry which would house GCFA within its structure that contains programs for mission and ministry. This mixes the job of recommending the size of the apportioned budget with the job of seeking apportioned funds for programming. This is the most dangerous part of the proposed legislation. It has not been thought through.

Do you think the big narrative is the shift of power to the bishops, whether intended or not?

It's there. And that's of great concern, I think, to many delegates. But that one can be fixed. Tim and some others have been working on this. I think the idea of the set-aside bishop scares many leaders. The general church is supported financially by the annual conferences and local churches. Our quest for more vital congregations must focus the work of the agencies upon serving the annual conferences and local churches. To me, this means that the annual conferences and local churches must have greater influence upon programming decisions—not less.

Do you think the idea of redirecting \$60 million (of the proposed \$603 million four-year UMC budget) away from the general church agencies, toward boosting the number of vital congregations, can fly?

Not unless you specify how it's going to be used. But there is time to perfect that proposal. It is a dangerous proposal presently because it lacks the specifics of how the funds are to be spent. More importantly, it suggests that the agencies and commissions have agreed that they can do just fine with \$60 million less in their budgets. Well, once you say that, then many will ask, "Why don't we just reduce the budget by \$60 million?" That will be one of the major proposals at General Conference.

Because that means lower apportionments?

Oh, yes. That's a 10 percent cut in apportionments. Very attractive sounding.

Do you think what Bishop [Minerva] Carcaño was saying about the agencies being disregarded in the restructuring counts as one of the torpedoes you mentioned?

I think it is. All of the special interests have their torpedoes unleashed, and they're heading for the ship. If you have an existing agency or commission working on your behalf, protecting the ministry that you care most about, and all of a sudden that agency or commission is gone, and the work is to be assigned to a department four levels down in the proposed structure, you would naturally feel that your special interests will be demoted. However, the alignment of strategies that results in church growth will benefit every special interest. With growth, we afford more resources to address the mission and ministries sought by special interests. With continuing decline, those resources disappear—not by choice but by necessary budget cuts. Having a strong influence over a smaller church cannot be a preferred result.

What's your biggest concern about things as they stand?

We should have a sense of urgency over the decline in our church in the US. The clock is ticking, and we will not

be able to fund the general church structure, as we know it, much longer. And the only way in which we can avoid that is local church growth in the United States, because that's where most funds originate to support the operations.

If you don't find a way in which you can turn this around and spur local church growth, all of this debating about structure will become a side conversation that's not terribly important.

Over the past 20 years, local church growth has not been our central focus. For a time, perhaps ten or 15 years, local church growth must be the central focus, even at the expense of other ministries. With sufficient growth, we can more fully attend to these other ministries that we so deeply care about. But unless we get this ship moving, and in the right direction, these other ministries will be going down through budget cuts—not from a lack of passion.

In other words, the trajectory is very bad?

The Economic Advisory Committee to GCFA is projecting for the very first time, essentially, no future growth in dollars received in our local churches in the US. The absence of growth in local church dollars has never happened before. These dollars have always been growing, even in the presence of membership decline. It is during this next quadrennium that we expect to hit the plateau. And that's nominal dollars, not inflation-adjusted dollars. If the trend continues, it will turn downward.

When it turns downward, and it will if we do not change course quickly, we'll no longer have the ability to collect the dollars necessary to try to turn this around. You won't have the capacity to do it. But we still have time, I think, if we can all get behind the same objective, and that is to grow the local church. With growth, we ensure the future of mission and ministry at levels that make a difference in our communities and throughout the world.

Do you know how to do that?

I think we do. We have been developing economic models of the church in the US since 1996, and we have completed a model of the denomination and its annual conferences. As I understand the research findings, what has to take place, given the changing demographics in our communities, are new investments in local church growth—both financial investments and investments in leadership. These financial investments are quite specific. I believe we have answers. But I may be wrong. I am looking at the challenge as an economist, and it requires additional perspectives.

How would you summarize your answers?

They are financial investments in the local church. One part of the solution is new church starts. But not all new church starts are the same. Most must be designed to have an average attendance in the first year of 80 or more and have the potential of average worship attendance of 800, within 10 years. Those are the ones that generate the funds necessary to do mission and ministry collectively. The other part is new focus on existing local churches. Local churches must invest in growth—developing budgets aligned for growth. Only with growth can they afford more support for mission. In the long run, mission support is maximized with growth. Without growth, mission will decline.

You need more churches for Hispanics. You need to minister to the Asian populations and the Native American populations. You need growth among African American congregations. You need growth among churches serving the rural areas. But you've got to understand that with declining budgets, the support for those ministries will decline. With growth, it will improve. For this reason alone, we must all seek local church growth.

We are in a position where we must buy ourselves a brighter future. In the past, a brighter future was given to us. Local church growth was not that hard to come by. Today and in the future, a brighter future will not simply be given to us. We are now swimming upstream, and we can do quite well swimming upstream. But we have to purchase a brighter future through financial investments in growth. This is what the economic model tells me. It's

going to take new church starts and local churches to align budgets for growth—investments in themselves-- investments in facilities, programs and non-clergy staff.

We talk about the need for more effective clergy leadership and lay leadership. Those are necessary. But those alone will not turn the ship quickly enough.

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