

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH NORTH CENTRAL JURISDICTION

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Two new episcopal areas to be formed in UMC North Central Jurisdiction;
No episcopal elections anticipated to be held in July 2024

GLENVIEW, IL – Elected delegates to a special called session of the United Methodist Church North Central Jurisdiction met virtually January 23, 2024, and approved the creation of two new episcopal areas within the jurisdiction, effective September 1, 2024.

Following the session, the NCJ Committee on Episcopacy determined it is anticipated there would be no new episcopal elections when the Jurisdictional Conference next meets, currently scheduled for July 10-13, 2024, in Sioux Falls, SD.

Results from Special Called Session

At the January 23 session, the delegates approved combining the Northern Illinois and Wisconsin conferences into a new episcopal area (123 yes – 5 no) and the East Ohio and West Ohio conferences into another new episcopal area (121 yes – 6 no). These decisions will result in seven episcopal areas in the jurisdiction -- a reduction from the current nine areas -- to which bishops will be assigned. The names of the new areas will be decided at the July gathering, and the assignment of bishops also will be made at that time.

No elections anticipated to be held in 2024

The NCJ Committee on Episcopacy of the North Central Jurisdiction anticipates no episcopal elections at the 2024 Jurisdictional Conference in July and will bring that recommendation to the Jurisdictional Conference. This recommendation is informed by the outcome of the January 23 Special Called Session, along with the retirement of two current active bishops, which will result in seven active bishops available for assignment in July.

Task Force Report: Recommended Best Practices- NCJ Functional Role of Episcopacy

The same set of recommendations from the NCJ Committee on Episcopacy which led to the Special Session to form new episcopal areas also included a recommendation to “form a Task Force to study the ‘Functional Role of the Episcopacy in the NCJ’ to imagine ways to make sharing episcopal leadership manageable, sustainable, and fruitful.”

The Task Force, which convened in a series of meetings since November 2022, also this week released an advanced copy of its report in preparation for the July 2024 session, where the report will be received and discussed. The Task Force is encouraging Conference (Area) Committees on the Episcopacy to review and discuss the recommendations to better support their episcopal leaders.

Context:

From 2021-2022, the North Central Jurisdiction (NCJ) lived out one model of reduced episcopal leadership, with Bishop Laurie Haller and Bishop David Bard assuming oversight of additional annual conferences for what became a 24-month “interim.” We discovered that the model of simply assuming leadership for another annual conference, though workable in extraordinary circumstances, was unsustainable for the long run.

However, with the dawn of an emerging United Methodist Church with fewer congregations and financial resources, we are faced with the realities of evaluating the functional role of the episcopacy knowing the near future will involve a reduction of episcopal leaders.

At the conclusion of the 2022 North Central Jurisdiction Conference session, the action was to form a Task Force to study the “Functional Role of the Episcopacy in the NCJ” to imagine ways to make sharing episcopal leadership manageable, sustainable, and fruitful.

The team, which met through a series of meetings, conversations, and a shared learning, determined we could not provide adequate recommendations, but rather concluded that providing best practices that could be consistently implemented across the jurisdiction proved a better outcome to our work in fulfilling the action for the Task Force.

Role of the Episcopal Leader:

“Methodists in America have always been, and remain today, a practical people, and they seldom allow theory or theology to overrule changes that they deem essential to progress.” (James Kirby, The Episcopacy in American Methodism, 174)

United Methodist Church Book of Discipline essentials in priority order (see ¶401-403)

- Leadership, with leaning into the spiritual side of leadership
- Creating a healthy, missional, creative, dynamic culture, and prophetic witness

- Appointing by deploying missional leaders humanely
- Presiding, as this offers a unique opportunity to set a tone for the conference
- Administering is necessary, but some aspects could be delegated

We identify the episcopal leader essentials as the authority to convene, the heart to encourage, and the responsibility to deploy leadership throughout the Episcopal Area(s).

Recommended Best Practices and Provocative Questions:

These recommendations potentially address the growing reality of decreased episcopal leadership in the NCJ due to funding, present the opportunity to further support the leadership sustainability of the NCJ Bishops who will be entrusted with the care of multiple annual conferences, and create greater alignment across the NCJ to advance the mission of The United Methodist Church.

A) Near Term Recommendations and Questions

- We recommend the NCJ Bishops be intentional regarding setting the tone for an annual conference with commonalities across the jurisdiction (as a common voice to call all into what we could and should be).
 - *What might it mean for the bishops to be the evangelical/prophetic, teaching, spiritual voice of an annual conference? (§403)*
 - *How might the bishops lean into the spiritual dimension of their role as spiritual and temporal leaders? (§403)*
 - *What would it mean to focus on the religious disaffiliation in society rather than denominational disaffiliation?*
 - *What might it mean for annual conferences to begin assessing and identifying opportunities to bring about a healthier culture for more fruitful ministry?*
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops model a servant presence and being a spiritual witness, which makes a significant impact throughout an annual conference.
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops begin communicating the shift in the appointment-making expectations of clergy and congregations, understanding Cabinets may need to utilize unconventional and unorthodox means of providing pastoral leadership.
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops prayerfully consider that culture development of an annual conference begins with the development of a healthy culture within cabinet leadership.
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops intentionally build relational capital with key stakeholders, which could include committed laypersons and clergy persons, and strategic ministry partners throughout the annual conference to garner greater support for ministry initiatives.
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops and conferences consider staffing models that are financially sustainable, but also fruitfully adaptive in meeting the needs of the episcopal leader and the annual conference. If we are to delegate some

administrative tasks, having adequate staff to work with the bishop is critical. We also share in the understanding that a reduction in the number of bishops does not necessarily equate to a cost savings to the annual conference(s).

- What would be the staffing model needed?
 - Potentially a shared Clergy Assistant to the Bishop for the purpose of:
 - Processing complaints
 - Working with the dean/chair of the Cabinet
 - Working closely with the Conference Chancellor
 - Providing leadership for the conference staff
- It may be that when a bishop is assigned to lead two conferences each conference may have a Clergy Assistant to the Bishop.
- How do we staff for excellence for sustaining resilient structures and systems to manage the crises that will arise?
- Are there productive and fruitful ways to share staff across the jurisdiction in areas such as information technology or disaster response?
- Encourage conference boards, committees, and agencies to be more strategic in their request for a bishop's time, e.g. front-loading agenda items that require the bishop's input and deciding when the bishop needs to be present.
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops develop a rhythm for cabinets of different annual conferences to periodically meet and work together for adaptive learning and discoveries.
- We recommend the NCJ Committee on Episcopacy review and continually refine its list of qualities and characteristics needed in episcopal leaders.

B) Longer Term Recommendations and Questions

- We recommend that the NCJ Bishops work with the Council of Bishops, General Secretaries, and The Connectional Table to redefine the role of bishops within General Agencies with the goal of giving the bishops more time and presence in their annual conferences.
- We recommend the NCJ Bishops work with the Council of Bishops to explore greater cooperation, particularly across jurisdictional conferences and regional boundaries.
- How might the Council of Bishops change to support the deep changes needed for a shifting episcopacy?
- What are the limits of our current jurisdictional system?
- What are the limits of the guaranteed appointment systems and limited itinerancy realities?

Overall Recommendation:

The NCJ College of Bishops and Committee On Episcopacy jointly affirm these best practices and begin to address the current realities that require innovative and creative means to ensure our bishops are utilizing their greatest gifts and human resources for the areas to which they are assigned, and the mission of making disciples is adequately resourced for annual conferences.

Further, we affirm the vital importance of having bishops lean into the spiritual dimension of their spiritual and temporal leadership role.

NCJ Role of the Episcopacy Task Force

Rev. Dr. Aleze Fulbright, Indiana, and Bishop David Bard, Michigan, co-convenors
Anish Hermon, Illinois Great Rivers Conference
Rev. Carol Zaagsma, Minnesota Conference
Lisa Jones, Wisconsin Conference
Rev. Brian Gilbert, Northern Illinois Conference
George Howard, West Ohio Conference
Bishop Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, Iowa Conference
Bishop Dan Schwerin, Northern Illinois Conference

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