

Report of the Task Force on the Nature of the Episcopacy

For the last six months, the Task Force on the Nature of the Episcopacy has engaged in honest discussion, discovery, debate, and consensus building. I appreciate and value each of you and the prayerful diligence you've brought to this work. We have come to unanimous consensus on most of the challenges before us including:

- Recommend the election/selection of bishops at the General Conference.
- Recommend a general superintendency/episcopacy rather than a residential episcopacy.
- Recommend the bishops will be itinerant with primary linkage to 4 or 5 geographic conferences where they will teach, preach, evangelize, guard, and defend the faith, fix appointments and ordain clergy with a plan of visitation for each annual conference.
- This allocation is for American bishops—the allocation for other regions will need to be determined as they develop to the point a recommendation can be made.
- Recommend the temporal leadership of the bishops be exercised as officers of the General Conference, and through selecting and appointing Conference Superintendents (the present President Pro Tempores) in consultation with the leaders of each annual conference—and recommend the nomination of the person to serve as the Connectional Operations Officer in the process initiated by the Connectional Council. The COO will be accountable to the Connectional Council (which will include representation from the Assembly of Bishops).
- Recommend their temporal leadership linkage will be as the officers of the General Conference and through the President Pro Temps/Conference Superintendents in each geographic area.
- Recommend the primary place of accountability for our bishops will be to a General Committee on Episcopacy—which will be intentional in representation for regions of the entire church.
- Recommend Committee on Episcopacy would refer all complaints about bishops to the bishops so that the first place a complaint or issue may be resolved is among colleagues. Once the bishops reach a recommended resolution, this decision would be referred to the Committee on Episcopacy for consideration. If the Bishops are not able to provide a recommended resolution, the complaint would be processed through the Committee on Episcopacy and follow Judicial process.
- Recommend that while the President Pro Tempores can be considered as candidates for election as a bishop, we do not recommend any consideration be given to electing each of them as a resident bishop of their Annual Conference at the General Conference. However, a President Pro Tempore may be nominated as a transitional bishop with a 67% majority of the TLC.
- Recommend episcopal term limits since bishops are consecrated to an office from among the elders and not a separate order to themselves.
- Recommend bishops will be allowed to stand for election after their first term of service has ended.
- Recommend bishops will be elected at every General Conference. Beginning in 2026, this will be for a six-year term and can be elected for a second term.
- Persons elected in 2024, may be re-elected in 2026 if they received a 2/3 threshold to be included in the election process, and would be eligible to stand for election for a third term in 2032.
- Recommend there be no maximum age for a person to be considered for election as a bishop.
- Recommend the threshold for election is 60%+1 of the members of the General Conference.

- Recommend Bishop Jones and Webb stand for election at the General Conference. This comes with great appreciation for their leadership and piety, but also the understanding that we want all who serve us moving forward to be elected by our General Conference.
- Recommend if an active bishop chooses to stand for election, they should not preside at General Conference during voting for episcopal candidates. The task force recommends that a bishop emeritus preside at such sessions.
- Recommend that bishops be paid by the General Church.
- Recommend bishops be compensated at a culturally sensitive standardized rate.
- Recommend the development of a nominating or vetting process by the General Committee on Episcopacy for episcopal elections in 2026.
- Recommend we use paragraph 504 as the backbone for our recommendation for the role and function of the Conference Superintendent.
- Recommend the appointment process needs to reflect the high consultation reality of this transitional period—and ability for clergy and churches to decline a proposed appointment.

That said, we have been stuck when it comes to discerning a way to appropriately vet and bring forth candidates to stand for election to the episcopacy—and how they should be elected. We are divided when asking questions like: Should bishops be elected to serve any geographic location regardless of country or continent? Or should they be elected to serve the whole church but from native geographic or demographic subsets? For example, should Americans be elected to serve in America, Africans to serve in Africa, Europeans to serve in Europe, Filipinos to serve in the Philippines, etc.?

We are close, but the timeline for completing the entirety of our work to be presented to and perfected by the TLC before the legislative deadline appears to be a bridge too far.

We might be able to force this through, but we're reminded of a moment that inevitably comes during the birth of a child. There comes a moment when the mother wants to push to bring their child into the world, but she often needs to wait for her body to catch up with its desire. To push too early brings the likelihood of extra damage to the mother and can endanger the child. So—the mother must take deep breaths to allow her body to catch up with the desire to give birth.

In our opinion, there are several forces at work which have the potential to cause damage to the body if we don't slow down the process of birthing this part of our church:

- There are vast regions of the church that are either already in the GMC or coming to the GMC that expect each conference to have its own bishop. We have a significant communication challenge to get the word out and tell the story of why we're making these recommendations—especially when there are segments of the church who still anticipate electing their own bishops or having residential bishops—and other segments (like some of the conferences in Africa) who may be bringing their bishops with them after the UMC General Conference.
- Because we're introducing a dramatically different understanding of the episcopal office, we will have to overcome people's assumptions and preconceived notions of the role, function, election, and assignment of bishops. We believe we need to present the work defining the nature and role of the episcopacy in 2024—and suggest we delay episcopal elections using this process until the General Conference in 2026.
- While the United States is further along the pathway to having a conference for every geographic region of its country, there are many areas in other parts of the world that simply have not had the opportunity to reach the same place of readiness to proceed with the kind of episcopal

elections we have envisioned. It is anticipated most regions of the church will be ready by 2026. Passing the pertinent descriptions about the nature, role, function, election, and assignment of bishops and the work of the General Committee on Episcopacy in 2024 will help recalibrate the whole denomination's understanding of the episcopacy before we hold elections. This will enable much of the denomination to step into the future at the same time.

- There are individuals and conferences that are already acting like they are “running” or “jockeying” for the episcopacy. Whenever the election of bishops is mentioned, the temperature rises, and the body returns to former patterns of behavior. We need to have a clear and deliberate way to nominate/surface, vet, and recommend persons to be referred to the General Conference for election. We believe we should recommend the election of the General Committee on Episcopacy by the General Conference in 2024 and charge them to develop such a process for 2026.
- Organizations tend to have more robust processes for selecting senior leadership than a blind popularity contest. As our denomination develops as an organization, we've begun to have search processes for senior leadership roles in which persons are suggested, given the opportunity to apply, appropriately vetted and in the end, a qualified candidate is placed before the appropriate body for election. This has and will result in a much better selection for each respective role. Why would we not want to provide a similar process for our potential bishops? We have previously talked about the way the Free Methodist Church has de-politicized this process. Are there things we can learn from other communions who have done this better?
- We need to have a process for identifying, inviting, nominating/selecting (which we believe needs to involve the annual conferences), vetting, and recommending candidates for episcopal election. It's our growing concern we don't have the time to do this well if we vote on the nature, role, function, election, and assignment of bishops AND use a yet undeveloped process in 2024. If we pass the legislative package on the refine nature and role of the episcopacy our movement in 2024 and wait to elect bishops who fit this description and are vetted through a process, the church will be better prepared in 2026. The General Conference would still elect the bishops—but we recommend the delegates do so from a pool nominated, vetted, and proven to have the gifts and graces needed for the episcopal office by the TLC.
- The General Commission on General Conference has not planned for the election and consecration of bishops in 2024—at least not in a traditional sense. They will make this happen if forced, but this was not a part of their conversation until someone leaked this idea to them about four weeks ago. The election of bishops has the potential to derail the celebration of our convening General Conference and cause us to degrade into petty politics.

For these and other reasons, we conclude our work as a task force by recommending the following:

- Propose we recommend all we've come to agreement on about the nature of the episcopacy to be presented to the General Conference in 2024 with the recommendation that election of bishops be delayed until the 2026 General Conference. This will give the General Conference the chance to clearly speak and send the message of change in the nature of the episcopacy. This will help educate and prepare the church. The suggested disciplinary paragraphs will be submitted to the TLC by February 19.
- Propose we recommend the role of President Pro Tempore be renamed as Conference Superintendent in 2024, and that the bishops select and appoint Conference Superintendents. Their role will be defined by using the work we've done around Conference Superintendents in

the disciplinary paragraphs. The suggested disciplinary paragraphs will be submitted to the TLC by February 19.

- Propose that we recommend the General Committee on Episcopacy be elected at the 2024 General Conference and charged with developing the plan to surface nominations for the episcopacy from the whole church, vet the candidates, and develop a qualified slate for at least twice the number of bishops to be elected that is representative of the rich diversity of our movement including gender, geography, and other demographic considerations. Consideration should be given for any elder to have their names placed in nomination. The General Committee on Episcopacy must have its plan approved by the Connectional Council at least 12 months prior to the 2026 General Conference to ensure the time to identify, vet, and recommend candidates. The list of vetted episcopal candidates is to be released to the whole church at least 6 days prior to the 2026 General Conference. The task force would be willing to provide its work related to episcopal nominations and election with the General Committee on the Episcopacy if requested. The suggested disciplinary paragraphs will be submitted to the TLC by February 19.
- Propose the Committee on Episcopacy work with the Connectional Operations Officer to develop a recommendation of compensation for bishops at a culturally sensitive rate and a proposal for the shared expense for bishops to be brought to the 2026 General Conference.
- We acknowledge that our desire was to elect Bishops of the Global Methodist Church this year in part because of the desire to affirm the work of Bishops Jones and Webb—and in recognition that it's impossible for two active bishops to continue to serve the whole church. Therefore, we propose Bishop Jones and Webb be elected by acclamation and affirmed as bishops of the Global Methodist Church early in the 2024 General Conference. They would be eligible for election in 2026—and then be subject to election and the term limits proposed at each subsequent meeting of the General Conference.
- We suggest the General Conference elect and consecrate additional transitional bishops for 2024 to 2026 to assist Bishop Jones and Webb. We propose the TLC (in consultation with whatever bodies it chooses) determine the number of additional bishops needed to provide leadership to the church for the next two years; nominate a slate of at least twice the number of persons needed which is representative of the rich diversity of our movement including gender, geography, and other demographic considerations to present to the 2024 General Conference; and the General 2024 General Conference elect and consecrate the needed number of transitional/interim bishops. We suggest enough bishops be elected to cover 4-5 annual conferences each as per task force recommendations.
- The General Conference may nominate additional candidates to be added to the TLC's list of nominees according to the following process: With a bishop emeritus presiding, delegates may nominate additional candidates to be added to the TLC's list of nominees. Once all nominations are received, the delegates will vote for their top three candidates. All nominees receiving a simple majority [or 67%] of votes of those delegates present and casting valid ballots would be added to the TLC's list of nominees.
- Propose the people nominated as transitional bishops either be retired or continue to serve in their present roles with only their episcopacy-related expenses being paid by the General Church. The transitional bishops will not be permitted to stand for election to the episcopacy in 2026 without the 2/3 affirmation of their inclusion in the process by the 2026 General Conference.

Respectfully submitted: February 9, 2024

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