

The Structure of the United Methodist Church, Explained

by Ryland Christian Fernandez

Introduction – The United Methodist Church. With a total of over 12 million members worldwide and over 6 million members in the US alone, the UMC is one of the world’s largest Christian denominations and ranks as the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the US. With a membership population that large, there has to be some sort of structure in place to keep the entire denomination from caving in like a gigantic house of cards or an old mine shaft.

Fortunately, there is! Unfortunately, it can be quite confusing to understand just how the whole system works.

The purpose of this article is to provide a better understanding of the UMC’s intricate structure and to show how each level contributes to the global church. However, before we examine the present structure of the Church, let’s trace the roots of Methodism all the way back to the very beginning, to see how got to where we are today.

History – Methodism began with two brothers, John and Charles Wesley. During their time at Oxford University in England in the 18th Century, the Wesley brothers came together with other students to form a group that focused on a more methodical study of scripture and holy living. Other students began to mock them for their intentionality, calling their group the “Holy Club” and calling group members “Methodists.” Later on in their lives, in May of 1738, John and Charles Wesley (now as Anglican priests), inspired by a series of transformative religious experiences, began a new religious movement that emphasized salvation through the grace of God and not through good works alone. Their movement attracted many individuals, who were now called “Methodists.”

Many of these Methodists immigrated to the American colonies, bringing the new Methodism movement to the New World. Because Methodism was started without the authorization or support of the monarchy, American Methodism required active participation from the people of the colonies. Following the American Revolution, Methodists in the newly formed United States of America became separated from the life and sacraments of their native Church of England/Anglican Church, needing a definitive leader to establish a Methodist Society that operated independently from their former Church. To that end, John Wesley sent Thomas Coke to serve as superintendent of this new Methodist Society, along with revisions of the Anglican Prayerbook (The Book of Common Prayer) and the 39 Articles of Religion (historically defining statements of doctrines and practices that helped to govern the Church of England).

In December of 1784, the Christmas Conference was held in Baltimore at the Lovely Lane Methodist Church (considered the Mother Church of American Methodism), where the Methodist Episcopal Church was officially established. This was the true beginning of the Methodist Church in America.

The UNITED Methodist Church – Fast forwarding to the 20th Century, the Methodist Church had seen a number of divisions and mergers, with the most significant merger occurring on April 23, 1968. At a meeting of the constituting General Conference in Dallas, Texas, the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church came together to form the United Methodist Church, becoming the denomination we know today.

Division of Labor – Now that we’ve briefly discussed the history of the UMC, let’s take a brief look at its overall structure. The UMC is organized in a very similar fashion to the US Government, with executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and an overarching document, the Book of Discipline, serving as a constitution.

The UMC’s executive branch consists of the episcopacy, or the Bishops. A UMC Bishop is a clergy person that is elected by their jurisdiction or central conference to serve a region for a four-year term; they are responsible for the spiritual and administrative leadership of their assigned region, or Annual Conference (more on this later). Any new Bishop may not be assigned to the area from which they were elected for at least four years following their election; however, this restriction may be ignored if a two-thirds vote is received from both the jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy and the Jurisdictional Conference.

The UMC's legislative branch is made up of Conferences. Starting at the worldwide scale, the **General Conference** is the primary lawmaking body of the entire UMC. Following each General Conference, a revised Book of Discipline is published to reflect the legislation passed. Moving towards the smaller conferences, the **Jurisdictional Conference** consist of multiple-US-state regions and are responsible for the appointment of new Bishops and the selection of members for general boards and agencies. The **Annual Conference** is the most basic unit of legislation; it is at these annual meetings where clergy members are officially assigned to congregations, reports are given on past and ongoing work, legislation pertaining to the local churches of the region and the work of the Church is discussed/adopted, clergy are ordained as deacons/elders, and (every 4 years) delegates to the General and Jurisdictional Conferences are elected. Outside of the US, Annual Conferences are referred to as **Central Conferences**.

Finally, the UMC's judicial branch is the Judicial Council. It is the highest judicial body of the Church and determines the constitutionality of acts/proposed acts of the Conferences according to the Book of Discipline. It consists of 9 members, which are elected by the General Conference.

From Global to Local – Let's further examine the legislative branch of the UMC, which is where most of the confusion over the structure of the Church arises.

General Conference. When you think of the UMC as a global church, this gathering is usually what comes to mind as the best representation of the global nature of the Church. Every 4 years, delegates from all over the world come together for nearly 2 weeks to set official policy and speak for the entire Church. Half of the delegation is made up of lay people, and the other half is made up of clergy members.

Jurisdictional Conference. In the US, the UMC divides the country into 5 regions, or jurisdictions. The 5 jurisdictions are the Northeastern Jurisdiction, the Southeastern Jurisdiction, the North Central Jurisdiction, the South Central Jurisdiction, and the Western Jurisdiction. Each jurisdiction contains anywhere from 8 to 15 Annual Conference regions. *We are located within the Western Jurisdiction.*

Annual Conference. The term "Annual Conference" refers to one of three things: "a regional body, an organizational unit, and a yearly meeting" (UMC.org). As a regional body, an Annual Conference can encompass anywhere from part of a US state to more than one state. As an organizational unit, the Annual Conference is made up of staff that oversee and work in different ministries and committees of the Annual Conference. In total, the US has 54 Annual Conferences. *We are located within the California-Nevada Annual Conference region.*

Districts. Within an Annual Conference, groups of local churches may be organized together to form a district, "somewhat similar to the way cities and towns are organized into counties" (UMC.org). Each district is led by a district superintendent, a clergy person who is appointed by the Bishop to serve in this leadership role. The duties of the district superintendent range from overseeing the ministry of the local churches of the district to providing spiritual and administrative leadership to working with the Bishop in appointing pastors to local churches. Our Annual Conference currently has 5 districts: Great Northern, El Camino Real, Central Valley, Bay, and Los Rios. *We are located within the Los Rios district.*

The Local Church. The local church is a clear and visible sign of Christ's and the UMC's presence in the community and world. It is here where most individuals have their first contact with the UMC, not realizing that "they are part of a bigger whole or connection: an annual conference, a jurisdiction, the General Church, and churches and annual conferences around the world" (UMC.org). The ministries of the local church are vital to the UMC's mission, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Sources

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