

A WIDENING STREAM: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING UNITED METHODISM'S 1968 AND 2008 MERGERS

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By any standard, 1968 was a tumultuous year, and the decision to merge the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC) and the Methodist Church (MC) manifested hope in the midst of this social and political turmoil. Close connections between these two streams going back nearly two hundred years and a twentieth-century ecumenical context encouraging organic union enabled this merger. While the work remained unfinished on April 23, 1968, the Uniting Conference expressed its will to unify these streams ritually, symbolically, and legislatively. Newly formed, The United Methodist Church (UMC) voiced its ambition through the quadrennial theme, "A new church for a new world!" The themes of church, world, and ambition continue to shape and characterize this institution as it struggles to maintain unity fifty years later.

Worldwide ambition has characterized Methodism from the beginning. From John Wesley's evangelical declaration that "The world is my parish" to the UMC's more recent effort to live into its "worldwide" nature, Methodists have recognized no boundaries as they have sought to change the world. Methodist mission, whether "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" or "To reform the nation and, in particular, the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land," has often been mixed with nationalism, racism, and other ideologies of power.² Thus, Methodists, particularly those in positions of social, political, and economic power, are continuously in danger of undermining the church's witness through neo-colonialism, globalization, and an "imperialistic mindset."³ Occasions of institutional merger expose these dynamics.

The conference, "Merging the Streams: Celebrating The United Method-

¹ This article is based on a paper I presented at the conference "Merging the Streams: Celebrating The United Methodist Church's 50th Anniversary," Dayton, Ohio, July 9–11, 2018.

² Bishop Gregory Palmer reminded attendees of these dynamics during his sermon in the opening worship of this conference, July 9, 2018.

³ On neocolonialism, see Elaine A. Robinson, "Recovering los Desaparecidos," in *A Living Tradition: Critical Recovery and Reconstruction of Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (Nashville: Kingswood, 2013), 189. On globalization, see Joerg Rieger, "Globalization, Empire, and Beyond: The Pitfalls and Promises of a Global Church," GBHEM Occasional Papers, no. 101 (December, 2008); http://web.archive.org/web/20160423052603/https://www.gbhem.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/OCC_RIEGERGLOBALIZATION2008.PDF. On imperialism, see Gary L. Roberts, "Remembering the Sand Creek Massacre: A Historical Review of Methodist Involvement, Influence, and Response," in *Daily Christian Advocate Advance Edition* (2016), 1235–1408.

ist Church's 50th Anniversary," held in Dayton, Ohio in July, 2018, evidenced the often-unintended effects of these tendencies. A hypothetical comparison will illustrate this point. Imagine a meeting of the Historical Society of the UMC in the year 1979, about ten years after the Dallas Uniting Conference. The meeting is a jubilant remembrance of the merger that shaped this church into being. At this celebration, no members of the former EUBC are present. Not one plenary speaker mentions that momentous occasion of 1968 or even alludes to the legacy of the EUB tradition. Instead, Methodists have gathered to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Protestant Church, and Methodist Episcopal Church, South. This strange, fictional occurrence is meant to highlight the oddness of the "Merging the Streams" conference when viewed through a lens critical of our US-imperialistic mindset.⁴ The 2018 conference—a gathering sponsored by the Historical Society, the General Commission on Archives and History, and several other UM entities—celebrated a fifty-year-old merger when a more recent and more complicated merger went unacknowledged and unmentioned by the plenary speakers and organizers.

The merger of the UMC and the Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d'Ivoire in 2008⁵ exposes some of the difficulties of realizing United Methodism's ambitions for global expansion as a "worldwide" church. While this joining of denominational bodies is not commonly identified as a "merger," a comparison to the 1968 merger makes a compelling case for doing so, shedding light on the institutional gridlock the UMC has faced since 2008.⁶ In fact, when interpreted as such, many of the major items of business that General Conference referred to various entities in 2016 appear as belated attempts to address the work necessary for a denominational union. The inability or unwillingness of the UMC to treat the 2008 event as a merger—with the same care, planning, and attention paid in 1968—suggests that the UMC's divisive debates over homosexuality may not be the most significant source of division hampering this church's ability to operate as a unified institution.

Merging Streams: 1968

The EUBC and MC had deep, historic ties upon which to build a united church. However, differences in language and styles of authority proved significant obstacles to full fellowship, delaying organic union for over 150

⁴ I write as a white US citizen and resident, life-long Methodist, and scholar of global United Methodist polity who has inherited this mindset even as I struggle to overcome it.

⁵ As discussed below, the action initiated in 2004 was not fully consummated until 2008.

⁶ I first described the basic contour of this argument in Darryl W. Stephens, "Unfinished Business of a Worldwide Nature: Why Sanctions on the Episcopal Church Matter to United Methodists," *United Methodist Insight* (January 15, 2016), <http://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/unfinished-business-of-a-worldwide-nature/>; and Darryl W. Stephens, *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness* (Knoxville, TN: U Tennessee P, 2016), 202–205.

years.⁷

Formal talks of unification between the EUBC and MC began in 1958, about the same time that the Methodists' talks of union with the Episcopal Church faltered.⁸ Years of study, formal consultations, commission meetings, and negotiations ensued. At issue were racial integration within the church (i.e. dismantling the segregated Central Jurisdiction), episcopal term limits, election of district superintendents, and ensuring that the smaller EUBC did not get swallowed up by the much larger MC. The collective efforts of both denominations through their Joint Commission produced a lengthy (300+ pages) "Plan and Basis of Union" in 1966, which served as "The Proposed Discipline for 1968." The respective General Conference sessions of each denomination overwhelmingly approved the proposal, and the measure was sent out for a vote by every annual conference.⁹ After ratification by both churches, another year was spent planning for merger at all levels of structure.

Official accounts emphasize the fanfare and pageantry of this significant occasion in the institutional history of Methodism. Ten thousand attendees in Dallas, Texas, USA witnessed the joining of the 750,000-member EUBC with the 10.3 million-member MC.¹⁰ The day began with a service of worship, including a ritual "declaration of union" reminiscent of matrimony, followed by a recitation of the Wesleyan covenant prayer.¹¹ This much-heralded event, so many years in the making and greatly celebrated by those present, marked the birth of a denomination still very much in the process of becoming one body.

The merger of 1968 left much business unfinished. Separate commissions during the UMC's first quadrennium were tasked with reconciling inherited statements of doctrine and social principles. The UMC's first attempt to coordinate the work of its general agencies through a version of the former EUBC's Program Council failed to pass muster with the Judicial Council in 1972.¹² The dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction and the racial integration of annual conferences was not completed until 1973. Additionally, the Commission on the Structure of Methodism Overseas (COSMOS), inherited from the MC, continued to study the relation of the parent church in the US to missional churches in other countries and to offer recommendations for change.

⁷ J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, ed. Kenneth W. Krueger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 55.

⁸ Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 424. Hereafter, *MEA* vol. I.

⁹ Behney and Eller, 390–391.

¹⁰ Richey et al., *MEA*, vol. I, 447.

¹¹ *Journal of the 1968 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, vol. I, eds. Emerson D. Bragg, J. Wesley Hole, and Charles D. White, 359, 363.

¹² Judicial Council Decision 364, October 26, 1972. Decisions can be accessed by number at <http://ee.umc.org/decisions/search>.

From Decolonization to Globalization

Despite a worldwide, ecumenical effort to promote the autonomy of countries and missional outposts previously colonized by Western political and ecclesial powers, the question of restructuring the MC globally had been overshadowed by the 1968 merger. U.S. Methodists claimed to need more time to learn about and understand the proposals offered by COSMOS.¹³ However, the work of COSMOS continued to be overshadowed by considerations more apparent and proximate to the US constituency that dominated the UMC and the MC before it. In 1972, COSMOS concluded its work seemingly in retreat from the bolder proposal it set out to explore four years earlier, handing off further questions to a newly formed Committee on Central Conference Affairs, as if the UMC's global structure were only of consequence to United Methodists outside the US.¹⁴ Nevertheless, within a few decades, the UMC's appetite for global expansion brought to the fore the same questions with which COSMOS had been grappling in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

To be sure, a wave of "overseas" conferences exiting the newborn UMC lessened the immediate pressure on COSMOS to pursue a radical restructuring of this church. The EUBC's mission philosophy was already geared toward ecumenical and autonomous relationships; this dynamic was not as familiar to the MC, which was accustomed to wielding structural control over its missional outposts.¹⁵ Churches in Europe, for the most part, remained as central conferences. However, while the EUBC and MC were busy merging, many annual conferences outside the US were on the move, propelled by the currents of political decolonization. With the exception of churches in the Philippines, which chose various routes (independence, affiliated autonomous status, and remaining a central conference), all of the Methodist conferences in Asia and Latin America became autonomous, the latter prompting the formation of the Council of Evangelical Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean (CIEMAL) in 1969.¹⁶ Between 1967–1972, twenty annual conferences chose autonomy: Burma (1967), Cuba (1967), Malaysia-Singapore (1968), Argentina (1969), Belgium (1969), Bolivia (1969), Chile (1969), Peru (1969), Philippines (United Church of Christ, 1969), Uruguay (1969), China (1970), Dominican Republic (Evangelical Church, 1970), Ecuador (United Andean Indian Mission, 1970), Nigeria (1970), Pakistan (1970), Taiwan (1971), Costa Rica (1972),

¹³ Commission on the Structure of Methodism Overseas (COSMOS), "Report No. 1," *Journal of the 1968 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, vol. II, eds. Emerson D. Bragg, J. Wesley Hole, and Charles D. White, 1786.

¹⁴ For discussion, see Bruce W. Robbins, *A World Parish?: Hopes and Challenges of The United Methodist Church in a Global Setting* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 63–64.

¹⁵ Richey et al., MEIA, vol. I, 427.

¹⁶ For a brief discussion and interpretation, see Robert J. Harman, "Historical Context for Affiliated Autonomous Methodist Churches and their Standing in a Global United Methodist Church," *United Methodist Insight*, June 9, 2016, <http://www.umglobal.org/2016/06/robert-harman-historical-context-for.html>.

Hong Kong (1972), Panama (1972), and Sierra Leone (1972).¹⁷ The result for the UMC was a united church much less international and much more focused on US interests than what had preceded it. The contraction of the UMC from being more global to more US-constituted was short-lived, however.

In less than a decade, the UMC had resumed the project of becoming a global church. Churches in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, which became autonomous in the 1960s, rejoined the UMC and, together with the Liberia annual conference, formed the new West Africa Central Conference in 1980. The Evangelical Episcopal Church of Burundi joined the Africa Central Conference in 1984.¹⁸ The process of re-internationalization accelerated from the mid-1980s to the present¹⁹ as United Methodists expanded missions in the Congo and established and re-established missions throughout the world: Zambia (1984), Malawi (1987), Russia (re-est. 1990), Uganda (1990), Kenya (1990), Latvia (re-est. 1991), Bulgaria (re-est. 1991), Ukraine (re-est. 1994), Croatia (re-est. 1995), Lithuania (re-est. 1995), Senegal (1995), Cambodia (1995), Ruanda (1996), Vietnam (1998), Kazakhstan (1999), Cameroon (2000), Moldova (2000), Botswana (2001), Belarus (re-est. 2002), Mongolia (2002), Kyrgyzstan (2003), Uzbekistan (2004), South Sudan (2005), Laos (2005), Tajikistan (2006), and Romania (2011).²⁰ Thus, the UMC's appetite for global expansion brought to the fore the same questions with which COSMOS had been grappling a few decades prior.

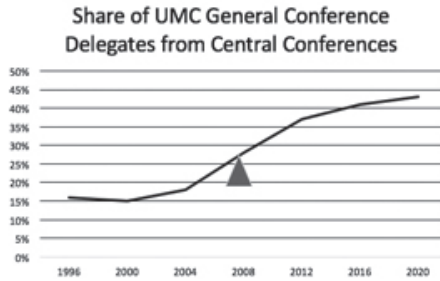
During this newer iteration of globalization, old patterns of inequality within the trans-national structure of the UMC resurfaced. Ambitions of expansion renewed the UMC's attention to the "Global Nature of the Church," to quote the name of a committee that made its first report to the Council of

¹⁷ I would like to thank my research assistant at Candler School of Theology, Dennis Hutchison, for gathering this information on central conferences from the General Minutes (published annually).

¹⁸ The Methodist church in Liberia had been given authority by the 1964 general conference to become autonomous but opted to remain a central conference. "History of The United Methodist Church in Africa," <https://www.umc.org/en/content/history-of-the-united-methodist-church-in-africa>.

¹⁹ This trend is coincident with the establishment of the Mission Society for United Methodists, an extra-denominational sending agency. David W. Scott, "Commemorating Mission: History as a Means to Revival of the Missionary Spirit," unpublished presentation to the Thirteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 12–19, 2018, citing Robert J. Harman, *From Missions to Mission: The History of Mission of The United Methodist Church, 1968-2000* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2005), 94–95. Scott also observed that through a comparison to the missional activity of other Wesley/Methodist denominations during the same time period, that The UMC's chosen path was not the way of becoming a global denomination ("Comparative Global Wesleyan Polity—Concluding Thoughts, Part I," *UM&Global*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.umglobal.org/2017/08/comparative-global-wesleyan-polity.html?m=0>).

²⁰ Aggregated from: "History of The United Methodist Church in Africa," <https://www.umc.org/en/content/history-of-the-united-methodist-church-in-africa>; "History of The United Methodist Church in Europe," <https://www.umc.org/en/content/history-of-the-united-methodist-church-in-europe>; and "History of The United Methodist Church in Asia," <https://www.umc.org/en/content/history-of-the-united-methodist-church-in-asia>.



Bishops in November, 1990.²¹ Yet, while the UMC conducted ongoing studies of its global structure every quadrennium from that point forward, central conferences continued to exercise a constitutionally-enabled double-standard by adapting the *Discipline* to their own contexts (even after voting on changes to the general *Discipline*).²² Furthermore, even as central conference representation at General Conference increased significantly in the new millennium as a percentage of the whole (15% of delegates in 2000; 18% in 2004; 28% in 2008; 37% in 2012; 41% in 2016; and 43% in 2020), General Conference still did not truly function as a multilingual, international body. Rather, it continued to focus mainly on the US context and concerns.²³ These older, paternalistic approaches proved insufficient in the wake of the merger of 2008.

A Widening Stream: The 2008 Merger

Propelled by an odd confluence of factors in the US—a liberal embrace of multiculturalism and globalism; a conservative drive for world evangelism and political coalitions with African delegates; and an ever-present mentality of global imperialism—the merger with the Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d’Ivoire in 2008 irreversibly widened the stream of United Methodism beyond its US banks. The occasion was a surprise to all parties.²⁴ Methodists in Côte d’Ivoire became autonomous from the British Methodist Church in 1985. This church subsequently requested mission status from the UMC’s General Board of Global Ministries (around 2001) in anticipation of joining the UMC in 2008.²⁵ Through a petition to the General Conference of 2004, the Commission on Central Conference Affairs recommended referring the matter to its executive committee for further study. However, during the

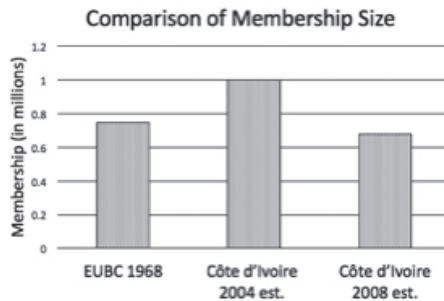
²¹ Robbins, *A World Parish?*, 11.

²² For discussion, see Robbins, *A World Parish?*, 84–88; and Darryl W. Stephens, “A Cross-Cultural Dialogue of Social Principles,” *Methodist History* 54.2 (Jan. 2016): 102–116.

²³ Robbins, *A World Parish?*, 19–20; and Stephens, *Methodist Morals*, 67.

²⁴ I cannot speculate as to the factors motivating the Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d’Ivoire to enter into this merger. However, the result included consecration of a bishop and access to US-funded agencies and other denominational resources.

²⁵ Elliott Wright and Rena Yocum, “Cote d’Ivoire denomination joins United Methodist Church,” *General Conference Newsroom*, May 7, 2004, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/cote-divoire-denomination-joins-united-methodist-church>.



General Conference plenary a delegate moved to add Côte d'Ivoire without delay.²⁶ This substitute motion passed, and the United Methodist News Service reported a one-million-member increase for the UMC, documenting surprise and delight among the respective leaders involved.²⁷ General Conference had accomplished in a matter of minutes a merger on the scale of that which created the UMC in 1968 and required ten years of deliberate preparation and five General Conferences within an eight-year span to complete. Or had it?

After the initial euphoria and a more precise census, the Judicial Council ruled that the appropriate Disciplinary procedures had not been followed and that the full integration of this 677,355-member conference into the UMC was dependent on confirmation by the next General Conference. The Council's 2006 ruling was openly critical of the actions of General Conference:

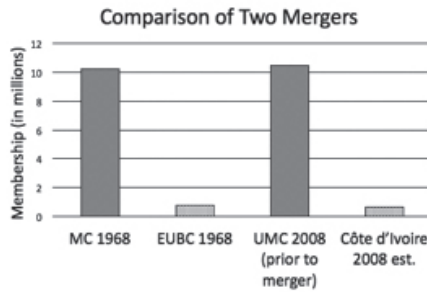
The aftermath of the harried discussion and precipitous action on the substitute motion has led many to believe that the Church of Côte d'Ivoire has joined The United Methodist Church under the provisions of ¶ 575. Such a process has not been achieved.

The most immediately presenting issue was the size of the delegation from Côte d'Ivoire to the next General Conference. As per the legislation approved in 2004 and upheld by Judicial Council, Côte d'Ivoire seated only two delegates in 2008. "Once the process of joining The United Methodist Church is fully achieved," the Council ruled, "Côte d'Ivoire would have the right to full representation in its delegations to the 2012 and succeeding General Conference Sessions." In 2008, General Conference officially effected this merger, leaving many issues unaddressed about how United Methodists in the US and Côte d'Ivoire were to relate to each other and to United Methodists in other countries and regions. Rather than streamline the process of merger, General Conference had merely postponed working through the details.²⁸

²⁶ Judicial Council Decision 1051, October 26, 2006.

²⁷ Wright and Yocum, "Cote d'Ivoire Denomination Joins."

²⁸ This paragraph adapted from Stephens, *Methodist Morals*, 203. Elliott Wright, "United Methodists formally admit Côte d'Ivoire," *UMNS*, April 27, 2008, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodists-formally-admit-cocirecte-divoire>. A dissenting opinion to Judicial Council Decision 1051 cited 591,142 professing members in the Côte d'Ivoire Annual Conference as of June 2006.



Contrasting the 1968 and 2008 Mergers²⁹

While the scale of mergers was the same [IMAGE 5], the contrasts between the mergers of 1968 and 2008 are startling. The merger of 1968 was preceded by years of preparation and planning; the vote in 2004 was initiated by an unexpected, substitute motion from the floor of General Conference. The 1968 union required a supermajority of votes and approval by the annual conferences; the 2008 action of General Conference required a simple majority and no such ratification. Special sessions of General Conference met two years prior and two years following the 1968 union; General Conference convened no special sessions in relation to Côte d'Ivoire (although a special session on church unity was later called for February 2019). In 1968, each denomination separately approved the same Plan of Union by a supermajority of votes; no such plan was prepared prior to the 2008 union. Restructuring of boards and agencies by both churches anticipated and followed the union of 1968; no such structural preparations took place concerning the 2008 merger. As part of the 1968 merger, former EUBC members were guaranteed spots on the boards and agencies of the UMC; members of Côte d'Ivoire had no corresponding promise of inclusion at the general church level. The 1968 merger occasioned the racial integration of this church through the dissolution of the segregated central jurisdiction; the 2008 merger maintained the inequalities and disparities of the central conference structures.

Some may argue that the 2008 joining of the UMC and the Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d'Ivoire differed qualitatively from the institutional union that resulted in the UMC in 1968. However, why would greater differences in language, culture, geography, institutional history, and socio-political context justify less rather than more preparation and attention to the details of being church together? After all, it was mostly a difference in language that prevented the German-speaking predecessors to the EUBC and the English-speaking predecessors to the MC from uniting sooner. The answer, I am afraid, is that from the UMC's perspective, this was seen not as a merger but an acquisition. These institutions did not view each other as equals. It was clear who held the power and controlled the finances. Nevertheless, the UMC could not continue church as usual after absorbing what immediately became its largest annual conference.

²⁹ Excerpted and adapted from Stephens, *Methodist Morals*, 203–204.

The Unfinished Business of Becoming the UMC

Since the 2008 merger, General Conference has struggled to enact major legislation, suffering what might be described as a form of institutional paralysis. For example, the failure of “Plan UMC” to restructure general agencies in 2012 created an eleventh-hour crisis on the final day of General Conference.³⁰ Calls for a more globally relevant version of Social Principles have been heard at General Conference since 2000 and remain unrealized as of this writing.³¹ General Conference ground to a halt on the issue of human sexuality in 2016; imminent division staved only by a narrow vote appealing to the Council of Bishops to establish a study commission and to call a special session of General Conference that met in February, 2019. The Commission on a Way Forward, a revised Social Principles document, and another attempt at restructuring the general agencies were among a number of issues of denominational structure or policy about which General Conference delayed consideration in 2016. In all, General Conference referred *nine* major legislative items to *seven* existing and *four* newly-created entities of the UMC for the 2017–2020 quadrennium.³² The breadth of concerns considered and referred by General Conference 2016 constitute a huge amount of ecclesiological restructuring, involving both polity and theology.

The parallels between the unfinished business of General Conference 2016 and the work required for the 1968 merger (see Chart 1 on p. 176) suggests the UMC is currently wrestling with fundamental changes to its denominational identity (and not just with regard to how it treats its LGBTQ members and leaders). For example, belatedly (and implicitly) acknowledging the need for a new *Discipline* in order to become a “worldwide” church, General Conference asserted in 2012 a subset of the *Discipline* to be a “global” *Book of Discipline* and called for clarification about which of the remaining paragraphs would be subject to change or adaptation. A significant difference between this effort and the proposed *Discipline* prepared for the 1968 merger is that the global/general *Discipline* is being attempted without amending the Constitution.³³ As in 1968, the UMC is engaged in revising

³⁰ Judicial Council’s decision echoed a similar decision on a similar attempt by General Conference to establish a general oversight agency forty years earlier; compare Judicial Council Decisions 364 and 1210.

³¹ Stephens, *Methodist Morals*, 104–105. General Conference 2020 is slated to consider a new revision of the Social Principles. General Board of Church and Society, “Social Principles 2020,” <https://www.umcsocialprinciples2020.org>.

³² Darryl W. Stephens, “Nine Referrals Seeking a Comprehensive Plan of Union,” *United Methodist Insight* (July 7, 2016), <http://um-insight.net/general-conference/2016-general-conference/nine-referrals-seeking-a-comprehensive-plan-of-union/>.

³³ Judicial Council ruled in 2014 (Decision 1272) that creation of a “global Discipline” was constitutional. However, in 2016 General Conference renamed this portion the “General Book of Discipline,” prompting again the question of constitutionality. Paragraph 31.5 of the Constitution gives central conferences the authority to adapt the “general Discipline” (implied: that version legislated by General Conference). Yet paragraph 101 states that the “General Book of Discipline” is precisely that version which cannot be adapted. It is unclear to this interpreter how both laws could be valid without contradiction.

the denomination's theological statement and Social Principles, considering restructuring general agencies, and reconceiving the role and function of a coordinating council. Whereas the churches involved in the 1968 merger committed themselves to racial justice and dismantling racially segregated structures, the acquisition of the Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d'Ivoire went forward without a commitment to full inclusion of LGBTQ persons and with no change in central conference structures, although both of these items face the next General Conference. The UMC continues a now seventy-year legacy of studying international structures within US Methodism from a primarily US perspective. How will General Conference 2020 reconcile these diverse referrals, each addressing some essential aspect of becoming a "worldwide" denomination?

Church, World, and Ambition

The UMC's merger with the Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d'Ivoire did not cause all of the issues currently pressing in on this denomination. However, it tipped what was already a precarious balance of political accommodations and inequitable relationships within United Methodist structures around the world.³⁴

The UMC is still struggling to become a "worldwide" church rather than a US-centered denomination with overseas missional outposts.³⁵ General Conference continues to conduct all of its business in English; General Conference struggles to provide adequate and timely translations of reports and legislation for delegates; and General Conference has never met outside of the United States. Each of these issues points to a need to remediate paternalistic and neo-colonial structures of oppression and dependence within the UMC, including disparities in education, healthcare, salaries, pensions, and apportionments. In the present climate of nationalism, it is curious that the UMC is stretching itself globally: will the US constituency of the UMC choose a "worldwide" nature over nationalism, even if it means ceding some of its power and money? The 2008 merger did not create but rather revealed these issues, widening the stream of United Methodism beyond the capacity of its current structures. The subsequent paralysis of successive General Conference sessions points to a critical need to rediscover a shared sense of what is essential to this "worldwide" denomination in order to move forward as a church unified in mission and ministry.

If the UMC today has as strong a will for unity as it had in 1968, it is not evident in the way this denomination has gone about its "worldwide" expansion. Prior to the Uniting Conference in 1968, annual conferences throughout the MC and EUBC voted on and approved a comprehensive Plan of Union. No such plan was presented prior to or following the 2008 merger. The tasks of becoming a "worldwide" denomination remain dispersed, delegated, deferred, and referred throughout the UMC. Open hostility, political

³⁴ Portions of this paragraph and the next are excerpted from Stephens, *Methodist Morals*, 204.

³⁵ Here, I echo the language of COSMOS, "Report No. 1," 1785.

jockeying, rampant mistrust, the development of shadow structures by caucuses, and piecemeal legislation at the general church level have siphoned off energy for doing the work of becoming a “worldwide” church.

Furthermore, it is not clear that the ambition for global expansion is mutual. Is the project of a “worldwide” church shared among United Methodists in central conferences, or is it primarily motivated by a US, imperialistic mindset? For example, the former Methodist Protestant Church of Côte d’Ivoire has shown ambivalence about participating in the business of the UMC. Côte d’Ivoire was the only annual conference not in crisis to fail to submit vote totals on the five constitutional amendments approved by General Conference 2016.³⁶ It also was the only annual conference to fail to revise its membership numbers for the 2020 General Conference delegation calculation.³⁷ In fact, as of August, 2018, Côte d’Ivoire consistently submitted to the General Council on Finance and Administration the same annual estimate of exactly 677,355 members that it initially reported in 2005.

The US membership of the UMC still has not taken adequate time and interest to understand what a non-paternalistic institutional relationship would look like within the international structures of the UMC. The contextual factors cited by COSMOS in 1966, prompting Methodism to consider changes to its worldwide structure, are just as relevant post-2008: tremendous growth of members outside the US seeking greater freedom for decision-making; spread of nationalism; a US-centric General Conference; influence of world and regional ecumenical councils; and a conviction that minor adjustments are inadequate for creating a world structure.³⁸ However, the same dynamics that made it difficult for COSMOS to present a full proposal to General Conference in 1968—that the US membership did not adequately understand the institutional issues involved and needed time to study them—are still present.

This widening stream we call United Methodism may have already dissipated its last-remaining denominational energies in a noncommittal effort to become the “worldwide” church its power-brokers have dreamt it to be. Whatever the UMC is and is becoming, it is no longer the same denomination that two merging streams formed in that tumultuous year of 1968.

³⁶ I am indebted to David W. Scott for bringing this to my attention; “Results of Annual Conference votes on Five Constitutional Amendments” (May 7, 2018), http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/documents/Detailed_results_of_Annual_Conference_Votes_on_Constitutional_Amendments.pdf.

³⁷ Again, I am indebted to David W. Scott for bringing this to my attention; “UMC General Conference 2020” (January 26, 2018), http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/press-center/documents/2020_Delegate_Calc_by_AC_with_2016_comp.pdf.

³⁸ Robbins, *A World Parish?*, 58.

*Chart 1: Comparison of Activities to Effect 1968 Merger to Unfinished Business of General Conference 2016.*³⁹

Activities to Effect 1968 Merger	Unfinished Business of General Conference 2016
Plan of Union (1966–68)—Constitutional changes required vote of all annual conferences	Global/General Book of Discipline (2012–2020; referred in 2016, petitions 60276, 60277)—no Constitutional changes proposed
Constitutional commitment to racial justice (Article V; 1968)	Debate over full inclusion of LGBTQ persons. Commission on a Way Forward (referred in 2016)
Theological Study Commission (1968–72)	Revision of Our Theol. Task (referred in 2016, petition 60676)
Social Principles Study Commission (1968–72)	Worldwide Social Principles (referred in 2012 and again in 2016, petition 60062)
Restructuring general agencies (1968) and General Council on Ministries (failed 1972, see Judicial Council Decision 364)	Restructuring general agencies via Plan UMC (failed 2012, see Judicial Council Decision 1210). Consideration of Revised Plan (referred in 2016, petitions 60945–47, 60950)
Inherited EUBC Program Council became General Council on Ministries (1968)	Inherited UMC Connectional Table possibly to become “Missional Collaboration Group” (referred in 2016, petitions 60815)
Dissolution of Central Jurisdiction (1968–1973)	Maintain Central Conference structures
Study of international polity: COSMOS (1948–1972)	Ongoing studies of the “worldwide nature” of the UMC (1990—present)

³⁹ Legislation from General Conference 2016 can be accessed by petition number at <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/legislation-tracking>.