

# The Future of the Episcopacy After Regionalization

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## Abstract

This article explores how the Regionalization Plan (RP) redefines the United Methodist episcopacy as a federal, regionally expressed office—decentralizing authority while preserving constitutional unity through the Judicial Council—within a system of connectional federalism.

Historically, the episcopacy evolved from a centralized national system (1784-1939) to jurisdictional federalism (1939), global differentiation (1968), and now constitutional regionalization (2024). Under the RP, each region or jurisdiction gains authority to elect and supervise its bishops, establish regional judicial courts, and adapt governance within shared “federal” constitutional boundaries.

The College of Bishops becomes the regional center of authority, while the Council of Bishops (COB) functions as a global covenantal forum. Connectional funding continues to sustain the global episcopacy, ensuring shared responsibility across regions.

Theologically, regionalization embodies unity without uniformity—a Wesleyan vision of connectionalism in which bishops serve as contextual shepherds bound by one consecration and Constitution. Despite ongoing challenges—unequal tenure patterns, risks of fragmentation, and the evolving role of the COB—the RP offers a coherent balance of missional flexibility and constitutional integrity.

In essence, the episcopacy after regionalization represents connection without centralization and leadership without domination, a living sign of the Church’s unity in diversity.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: An Office in Transition .....	2
1. Historical Trajectories: From Centralization to Federalism.....	3
2. Constitutional Realignment of Episcopal Powers.....	5
3. Regional Colleges and the Council of Bishops.....	6
4. Episcopal Accountability: Regional Committees, Courts, and Procedures .....	8
5. Funding the Episcopacy in a Regionalized Church .....	10
6. Constitutional Theology of Episcopacy in a Regionalized Church .....	11
7. Challenges and Risks .....	13
8. Opportunities for Renewal.....	14
Conclusion: Re-imagining the Episcopacy .....	15

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## Introduction: An Office in Transition

The episcopacy has long been one of the defining features of United Methodist polity. Bishops are elected, consecrated in the historic succession, and set apart as chief pastors, general superintendents, and signs of unity. They embody what John Wesley once called the “connexion”—the interwoven fabric of accountability, pastoral care, and missionary zeal that holds Methodism together.<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament portrays oversight (*episkopē*) as both pastoral and communal—rooted in Christ’s call to shepherd the flock (John 21:15-17; 1 Peter 5:2-4) and to build up the body in love (Ephesians 4:11-16)—the scriptural charter for connectional ministry.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the office of bishop in Methodism continues an apostolic pattern of connectional care rather than administrative hierarchy.

Yet the episcopal office has never been static. Its contours have evolved at every major structural turning point in Methodist history: the 1784 Christmas Conference, the 1939 Uniting Conference, and the 1968 merger that gave birth to The United Methodist Church.

The Regionalization Plan, passed by the 2020/2024 General Conference and ratified by an overwhelming majority of annual conference voters, represents the next such turning point.<sup>3</sup> By transforming central conferences into regional conferences, creating a U.S. region, and redistributing constitutional powers worldwide, it redefines not only the role of General Conference but also the scope, identity, and function of the episcopacy itself.

The question is not whether the episcopacy will change, *but how bishops will embody their office in a church that has chosen regional autonomy within a global connection.*

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley’s vision of the church was unapologetically connectional. Wesley insisted that Christianity could not be lived in isolation: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social, no holiness but social holiness.” “Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems” (1739) in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 14, 321 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007). See also Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography*, 96, 118 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 464 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Petition 21039-CO-¶9-C “Worldwide Regionalization,” also known as Regionalization Plan (RP), was passed by General Conference delegates 586 to 164. Ratified by the annual conference voters with 91.6% approval and canvassed by the Council of Bishops, the constitutional amendments on regionalization became effective immediately on November 5, 2025. See Council of Bishops press release of same date: <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/umc-bishops-finish-canvassing-of-constitutional-amendments-19435612>.

# 1. Historical Trajectories: From Centralization to Federalism

To appreciate the gravity of the Regionalization Plan (RP), one must situate it within the historical development of Methodist episcopacy, which has continually shifted between centralizing and decentralizing impulses in response to mission, polity, and social change.

## Methodist Episcopal Model (1784–1939)

At the 1784 Christmas Conference, the office of bishop was defined as that of a general superintendent, responsible for the entire connection. Bishops were itinerant in the fullest sense: they moved freely across all conferences, appointing pastors, presiding at sessions, and enforcing the *Discipline*.<sup>4</sup> This was a highly centralized model of oversight—functional for a frontier church, but one that placed enormous authority in the hands of a few leaders.<sup>5</sup> The lack of regional checks underscored the bishop’s role as a national rather than local figure.<sup>6</sup>

## Jurisdictional System (1939)

The Uniting Conference of 1939, merging the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church, created jurisdictions in the U.S. to elect and assign bishops.<sup>7</sup> While this system institutionalized racial segregation through the Central Jurisdiction, it also redistributed episcopal powers geographically.<sup>8</sup> For the first time, the church moved away from a single national episcopacy to a federated structure within the U.S., where bishops were chosen by and accountable to regional (i.e. jurisdictional) bodies.<sup>9</sup> This was the first major structural step toward episcopal federalism.

## Formation of The United Methodist Church (1968)

The merger of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church created The United Methodist Church (UMC). In the new Constitution,<sup>10</sup> central conferences outside the U.S. were granted adaptation powers,<sup>11</sup> which included the authority to elect their own bishops and determine their tenure.<sup>12</sup> Thus, episcopal authority became contextually differentiated: U.S.

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<sup>4</sup> See Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism*, 8-11 (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury & The Methodists*, 8-9 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ashley Boggan D., Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, Jean Miller Schmidt, *American Methodism*, 31-32 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> See Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 141-144 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> See Russell E. Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives*, 36 (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009); see also Wigger, *American Saint*, *supra* n. 4, 127-128.

<sup>7</sup> Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America*, 175-184 (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Boggan, Richey, Rowe, Schmidt, *American Methodism*, *supra* n. 4, 231-234.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, 243-244 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> All citations to the Constitution (Const.) and the *Discipline* conform to the 2020/2024 edition of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (BOD) (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House).

<sup>11</sup> Const. ¶32.5-7.

<sup>12</sup> Const. ¶¶31, 32.2, 47, 51.

bishops were elected by jurisdictions with life tenure, while central conference bishops often had limited terms or renewable tenures, reflecting cultural expectations and mission realities.<sup>13</sup> Already, then, the UMC had adopted a pluralized form of episcopal governance, even if it was described as an “exception” to the U.S. norm.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Regionalization Plan (2020/2024)**

The Regionalization Plan represents the culmination of this historical trajectory. It renames central conferences as regional conferences and creates a U.S. region on equal footing with all others.<sup>15</sup> This rebalancing of power codifies what was once “exceptional” into a general principle: the episcopacy is a “*special ministry, not separate order*”<sup>16</sup> but regionally expressed through constitutional authority.<sup>17</sup> No longer will the U.S. jurisdictional system stand as a unique, asymmetrical structure alongside central conferences; instead, all regions will function under parallel authority.<sup>18</sup>

The effect is a move from a centralized episcopacy (1784–1939), to a jurisdictionalized U.S. episcopacy (1939), to a differentiated global episcopacy (1968), and now to a federal episcopacy (2024 and beyond). The General Conference still holds authority over distinctively connectional matters,<sup>19</sup> including those that cannot be adapted.<sup>20</sup> But within those guardrails, regional conferences have constitutional authority to structure episcopal leadership in ways best suited to their mission.

Thus, the Plan parallels the constitutional models of culturally diverse countries such as Canada, Switzerland, and the United States: local autonomy within a federal covenant.<sup>21</sup> Bishops remain consecrated into apostolic succession, but their governance is federalized, reflecting the plural, polycentric character of the contemporary church.

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<sup>13</sup> See Kevin M. Watson, *Doctrine, Spirit & Discipline: A History of the Wesleyan Tradition in the United States*, 414–415, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth discussion of episcopal governance see Dennis M. Campbell, “Is There a Better Way to Elect Bishops?” and Judith E. Smith, “What Style of Leadership Will Our Bishops Embody and Model,” in Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, Dennis M. Campbell, ed., *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, 186–193 and 194–215 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> RP ¶¶9–10.

<sup>16</sup> BOD ¶402.

<sup>17</sup> RP ¶¶31.2, .7, 40, 46, 48–52.

<sup>18</sup> RP ¶28: “There shall be regional conferences for the work of the worldwide Church with such powers, duties, powers, and privileges as are hereinafter set forth, to be exercised equitably across the regional conferences, subject to limits fixed by the Constitution.”

<sup>19</sup> RP ¶16.

<sup>20</sup> RP ¶16.17, requiring a 60% supermajority.

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive study of Canadian, Swiss, and U.S. federalism see Luan-Vu N. Tran, *Human Rights and Federalism: A Comparative Study on Freedom, Democracy, and Cultural Diversity* (The Hague, Boston, New York: Martinus Nijhoff, 2000) and “The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: Justification, Methods, and Limits of a Multicultural Interpretation,” 28 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 33 (1996).

## 2. Constitutional Realignment of Episcopal Powers

The constitutional amendments embedded in the RP are sweeping in scope, restructuring how authority over the episcopacy is distributed across the global connection. Several provisions directly affect the office of bishop and the balance between regional autonomy and global accountability.

### **Election and Tenure**

Bishops will continue to be elected either by jurisdictional conferences in the U.S. or by regional conferences outside the U.S., preserving the practice of regional choice in leadership. Consecration “in the historic manner” anchors this process in the apostolic continuity of the church.<sup>22</sup>

Tenure patterns remain differentiated: bishops elected by jurisdictions have life tenure, while those elected by regional conferences outside the U.S. hold office under the terms established by their region.<sup>23</sup> This formalizes what may be called episcopal pluralism—a constitutional recognition that the exercise of the episcopal office need not be identical in all places, so long as consecration and constitutional oversight provide unity.<sup>24</sup> The Judicial Council has affirmed that such structural differences are valid as long as they do not contradict constitutional standards of episcopal accountability.<sup>25</sup>

### **Boundaries and Episcopal Areas**

The power to determine the number, names, and boundaries of annual conferences and episcopal areas now belongs to regional conferences (or to the jurisdiction where a region has jurisdictions).<sup>26</sup> This is a major shift: historically, the General Conference exercised significant authority in approving or changing these boundaries. Under the Plan, the College of Bishops’ supervisory plan does not override regional authority in this area.<sup>27</sup>

This decentralization reflects a broader move from global standardization toward regional discretion, ensuring that episcopal areas can be shaped by demographic, cultural, and legal

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<sup>22</sup> RP ¶46; Const. ¶46.

<sup>23</sup> RP ¶50; Const. ¶51.

<sup>24</sup> JCD 236 (1966) (confirming that limited terms outside the U.S. are valid and practiced).

<sup>25</sup> JCD 4 (1940): Affirms that differences in episcopal election and tenure among jurisdictions and central conferences are permissible under constitutional standards.

JCD 311 (1969): Holds that when authorized to elect bishops, a central conference “shall have power to fix the tenure of bishops elected by the said central conference.”

JCD 1272 (2014): Determines that only the General Conference can define or limit a region’s power to set episcopal terms or tenure.

JCD 1515 (2024): Rules that extending adaptation rights to U.S. regional or jurisdictional conferences requires a constitutional amendment, confirming that regional bodies cannot unilaterally change episcopal tenure or accountability systems unless such authority is constitutionally granted.

<sup>26</sup> RP ¶¶27.4, 31.2, 31.4.

<sup>27</sup> RP ¶40; Const. ¶40.

realities on the ground. For example, a growing African annual conference may be divided to allow for more focused episcopal oversight, while a European context might consolidate areas for sustainability.<sup>28</sup>

### **Judicial Oversight**

All regional conferences are explicitly empowered to establish regional judicial courts.<sup>29</sup> Currently, only central conferences have this authority.<sup>30</sup> These courts interpret regional *Disciplines* and oversee trial procedures for clergy, including bishops. The amendments specify that clergy must still be tried by clergy and laity by laity, preserving fundamental due process principles.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the Judicial Council retains its constitutional role: it reviews the constitutionality of actions by General, regional, and jurisdictional conferences, and hears appeals on the legality of actions taken by church entities.<sup>32</sup> This ensures that regional variations operate within a shared constitutional framework. The Judicial Council has consistently affirmed that no body may act beyond its constitutional warrant; legislation or action outside those bounds is null and void.<sup>33</sup>

## **3. Regional Colleges and the Council of Bishops**

Under regionalization, the College of Bishops becomes the functional center of episcopal authority within each region, while the Council of Bishops (COB) serves more as a coordinating and covenantal forum at the global level. This represents a subtle but significant redistribution of authority.

### **Regional Anchoring**

Each College of Bishops—composed of all bishops in a given region (or jurisdiction)—is charged with arranging “the plan of episcopal supervision” over annual and missionary conferences within its territory.<sup>34</sup> This provision places supervisory responsibility firmly at the

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<sup>28</sup> Const. ¶¶14–17, 24–28, 29–32, 39–41.

<sup>29</sup> RP ¶31.6.

<sup>30</sup> Const. ¶32.6.

<sup>31</sup> RP ¶31.6–7; Const. ¶32.6–7. See below 4. Episcopal Accountability.

<sup>32</sup> RP ¶56; Const. ¶¶56–59; BOD ¶¶2601–2612.

<sup>33</sup> JCD 96 (1953): Declares the *Discipline* the Church’s “only official and authoritative law book.” This means regional adaptations must still be anchored in the *Discipline* as authorized by the Constitution.

JCD 1366 (2018): Establishes the “principle of legality”—church law must be applied equally, fairly, and consistently. This principle is crucial to prevent arbitrary or selective application of regional standards.

JCD 1444 (2022): Affirms that acts outside constitutional or General Conference authorization are unconstitutional and of no legal effect. This prevents regions from exceeding their delegated constitutional scope.

JCD 1449 (2022): Reaffirms General Conference’s authority under Const. ¶16.3 to define and fix the powers of conferences and the episcopacy. It also warns against misusing legislative loopholes to circumvent constitutional boundaries.

<sup>34</sup> RP ¶48; Const. ¶49.

regional level. Bishops within a region are best equipped to understand demographic patterns, financial realities, and missional opportunities, and their College becomes the place where practical deployment decisions are made. The regional college thus becomes the “executive cabinet” of the region, ensuring that episcopal ministry is contextually grounded.

### **Ambiguity in the Regionalization Plan**

The RP’s wording leaves an unresolved question for the United States: does the U.S. region function only through its existing *jurisdictional* Colleges of Bishops, or does it hold both *jurisdictional* colleges and a distinct *U.S. regional* College of Bishops?<sup>35</sup> The phrasing that speaks of “*the College of Bishops of the regional conference where jurisdictions exist*” suggests the latter and can be read to preserve the old system (*jurisdictional* colleges) while also authorizing a new, regional-tier college.<sup>36</sup> In effect, the RP appears to invite a layered model that embodies continuity and change.

### **Two plausible implementations:**

- **Jurisdictions-only (continuity model).** The U.S. region continues to act through the five jurisdictional colleges. Each jurisdiction arranges supervision, assignments, and boundaries within its territory.<sup>37</sup> The U.S. “region” has no separate college; COB remains the sole global forum.
- **Two-level U.S. structure (implied model).** Jurisdictional colleges retain day-to-day supervision and assignment within their boundaries, while a U.S. Regional College of Bishops addresses cross-jurisdiction coordination—e.g., a U.S.-wide supervisory plan, interjurisdictional deployment principles, shared minimum standards for supervision, and common responses to crises that transcend jurisdictional lines.<sup>38</sup> This body would be *coordinating* rather than *controlling*, so as not to duplicate or preempt either jurisdictional authority or the COB’s global covenantal role.

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<sup>35</sup> The ambiguity can be seen in two key provisions: RP ¶48 (“The bishops of each regional conference or jurisdiction, if a regional conference has jurisdictions, shall constitute a College of Bishops...”) and ¶49 (“The bishops shall have residential and presidential supervision in their respective regional conference or jurisdiction, if a regional conference has jurisdictions, in which they are elected or to which they are transferred.”).

<sup>36</sup> RP ¶26.

<sup>37</sup> The wording of RP ¶40 suggests a single-tiered collegial structure for the United States: “The number, names, and boundaries of the annual conferences and episcopal areas shall be determined by *the respective regional conferences or by the jurisdiction*, if a regional conference has jurisdictions. The authority of regional and jurisdictional conferences provided herein is not circumscribed or limited by the authority provided to *the College of Bishops* to arrange a plan of episcopal supervision.” [emphases added].

<sup>38</sup> The language of RP ¶26 clearly stipulates this two-tiered collegial structure: “Each jurisdictional conference shall meet at the time determined by *the College of Bishops of the regional conference where jurisdictions exist* or its delegated committee, each jurisdictional conference convening on the same date as the others and at a place selected by the jurisdictional committee on entertainment, appointed by its respective College of Bishops unless such a committee has been appointed by the preceding jurisdictional conference.” [emphasis added].

## Global Connection

The COB continues as a constitutional body of all active and retired bishops worldwide. Under regionalization, however, its concrete administrative authority narrows to matters such as transfers of bishops from one region to another, or temporary and emergency assignments, and always subject to the consent of both the sending and receiving bodies.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the COB becomes less a central executive body and more a federation of regional colleges—a global forum for dialogue, consultation, mutual accountability, and coordination. Its authority is largely covenantal, expressed through shared commitments rather than top-down directives.

## Constitutional and Theological Implications

This redistribution raises a fundamental question: Is the COB a college of equals, bound together by a single consecration into apostolic succession, or is it better understood as a coalition of regional leaders negotiating across cultures? The language of the Regionalization Plan leans toward the latter,<sup>40</sup> suggesting that while consecration unites bishops into a “special ministry, not separate order,”<sup>41</sup> the exercise of their authority is regionally determined. The COB becomes a sign of global collegiality but not a central governing body.

This new balance mirrors the broader federal turn of the UMC’s polity: the episcopacy is no longer structured around a single locus of power but around polycentric leadership. Each region is autonomous in its own episcopal governance, yet all bishops remain bound in covenant through consecration and the Constitution. Theologically, this affirms a Wesleyan vision of connectionalism as mutual interdependence rather than hierarchical centralization—bishops as shepherds of their regions, yet accountable as a global college to the one Body of Christ.<sup>42</sup>

## 4. Episcopal Accountability: Regional Committees, Courts, and Procedures

### Committees on Episcopacy

Each region or jurisdiction must elect a standing committee on episcopacy (one clergy and one lay per annual conference), which reviews the work and character of bishops and recommends

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<sup>39</sup> RP ¶49; Const. ¶50.

<sup>40</sup> RP ¶48–49. Particularly, the following provision in RP ¶49: “In the case of an emergency in any regional conference or jurisdiction, if a regional conference has jurisdictions, through the death or disability of a bishop or other cause, *the Council of Bishops may assign* a bishop from another regional conference or jurisdiction...to the work of the said regional conference or jurisdiction...*with the consent of a majority of the bishops of that regional conference or jurisdiction.*”

<sup>41</sup> BOD ¶402.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley’s use of class meetings and band societies was not merely administrative but theological. He believed that holiness was nurtured best in accountable and structured community. See “Rules of the Band-Societies” (1738) in *The Works of John Wesley*, *supra* n. 1, Vol. 8, 272–273. See also Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 209 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*, 34–35 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980); Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, 32–33 (Franklin: Seedbed, 2014).

assignments. Crucially, final action rests with the regional or jurisdictional conference itself—not with the COB or the General Conference.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, the General Conference retains authority to establish additional mechanisms for episcopal accountability through the Council of Bishops, ensuring that bishops remain answerable both as regional leaders and as members of the global collegium.<sup>44</sup> This dual system reflects a federal model of checks and balances, where episcopal authority is rooted locally but subject to global oversight.

### **Regional Judicial Courts**

One of the most striking innovations of the Regionalization Plan is the empowerment of regional judicial courts with authority to interpret regional *Disciplines* and adjudicate trials of clergy, including bishops.<sup>45</sup> This development reshapes how episcopal accountability is exercised and raises important questions about uniformity, legitimacy, and legal pluralism in the life of the church.

### **Regional Autonomy in Trials**

In addition to judicial courts, each regional conference may adopt its own procedures for investigations and trials.<sup>46</sup> Bishops, like other clergy, may be tried according to standards and processes adapted regionally, so long as they remain within constitutional guardrails. This allows regions to frame disciplinary standards that reflect their own missional, cultural, and legal contexts—for instance, addressing questions of leadership ethics in ways that resonate with African customary law, European state–church legal frameworks, or U.S. nonprofit corporate expectations. The result is contextual legitimacy: bishops are accountable not to an abstract, uniform global system, but to their own region’s ecclesial covenant.<sup>47</sup>

### **Judicial Council Review**

At the same time, the Judicial Council retains appellate jurisdiction over constitutional questions. It continues to decide whether acts of General, regional, or jurisdictional conferences conform to the Constitution, and it has authority to rule on the legality of actions taken by church entities upon proper appeal.<sup>48</sup> This means that while trial procedures may vary across regions, the global Constitution sets a minimum floor of uniformity, particularly regarding due process, equal protection, and adherence to Restrictive Rules.

### **A Model of Legal Pluralism**

What emerges is a system of legal pluralism: regional judicial courts exercising substantive

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<sup>43</sup> RP ¶50; Const. ¶51.

<sup>44</sup> RP ¶50; Const. ¶¶16, 51.

<sup>45</sup> RP ¶31.6–7.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> RP ¶¶31.7, 50.

<sup>48</sup> RP ¶56; Const. ¶¶56–59; BOD ¶¶2601–2612.

authority locally, while a global constitutional court ensures overarching consistency. The episcopacy becomes accountable both to regional standards (expressing local covenant and context) and to the global Constitution (ensuring connectional integrity).

## 5. Funding the Episcopacy in a Regionalized Church

A crucial dimension of the RP is what it does *not* change: the funding system for the episcopacy. General Conference remains solely responsible for the connectional finance decisions that underwrite the office of bishop. In constitutional terms, General Conference fixes the uniform basis for electing bishops in U.S. jurisdictions and determines the number of bishops that may be elected by central (regional) conferences,<sup>49</sup> and it provides the connectional method for funding the episcopacy.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, jurisdictions/regions determine the number, names, and boundaries of episcopal areas,<sup>51</sup> and each College of Bishops arranges the plan of episcopal supervision within its territory.<sup>52</sup> In other words, *who pays and how many are elected* is connectional; *where and how they are deployed* is regional.<sup>53</sup>

### Practical implications in a regionalized church:

**System unchanged.** The RP does not alter the constitutional allocation of funding and election authority. General Conference raises and distributes general funds and underwrites the support of active and retired bishops; jurisdictions/regions retain authority to structure episcopal areas and supervision.

**U.S.-weighted funding.** Because the Episcopal Fund remains heavily reliant on U.S. giving, regions outside the U.S. have little financial incentive to downsize. Some may instead seek to increase the number of bishops or upgrade compensation where missionally justified. Requests for more bishops can be made by regional bodies, but the funding decision rests with General Conference—typically informed by the fiscal analysis of the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA),<sup>54</sup> the recommendations from the Standing Committee on

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<sup>49</sup> RP ¶31.2; Const. ¶17.10.

<sup>50</sup> Const. ¶17.5, .9.

<sup>51</sup> RP ¶31.2.

<sup>52</sup> RP ¶40; Const. ¶41.

<sup>53</sup> See JCD 1312 (2016) (holding that “the Constitution authorizes jurisdictional and central conferences to determine the names, numbers, and boundaries of annual conferences and episcopal areas...[and] each College of Bishops to arrange episcopal supervision within its jurisdiction or within the region of its central conference,” but also affirming that “the Constitution authorizes the General Conference to establish both a uniform method for electing bishops in jurisdictions and a connectional method for funding the episcopacy, thereby giving the General Conference authority for setting the number of bishops in each jurisdiction.”).

<sup>54</sup> BOD ¶801-819.

Regional Conference Matters Outside the USA (StCRCM),<sup>55</sup> the Interjurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy (IJCOE),<sup>56</sup> and the U.S. Regional Committee (USRC).<sup>57</sup>

**GCFA, StCRCM, IJCOE, USRC dynamics.** Facing tightening budgets, GCFA will press for alignment between connectional resources and regional requests, while StCRCM, IJCOE, and USRC will evaluate missional needs and sustainability. Expect stronger coordination—sometimes pressure—on regions to right-size both the number of bishops and compensation levels.<sup>58</sup>

**Missional exceptions remain possible.** Regions may seek missional exceptions to maintain or add episcopal areas when formulas would otherwise reduce them. Such requests must be justified missionally and weighed against connectional finances; approval does not bind the funding decision if connectional resources are insufficient.

In this way, episcopal funding after regionalization illustrates a key Methodist principle: connectionalism. Bishops are regionally elected and supervised, but their sustenance and retirement remain a global responsibility. The constitutional authority of General Conference ensures that financial stewardship is exercised for the good of the whole connection, even as regional conferences pursue contextual mission.

## 6. Constitutional Theology of Episcopacy in a Regionalized Church

The constitutional shape of episcopal ministry mirrors the biblical witness that leadership is both local and shared. The apostolic community practiced discernment in councils (Acts 15:1-29) and shared oversight across regions (Titus 1:5; Philippians 1:1), modeling a federal pattern of unity in diversity. As in the early church, where councils discerned the Spirit's leading for mission

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<sup>55</sup> BOD ¶2201. Formerly known as the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, this committee was renamed after the RP was ratified and went into effect. See Heather Hahn, "Regionalization starts taking effect," UM News article posted on November 10, 2025, at: <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/regionalization-starts-taking-effect>.

<sup>56</sup> BOD ¶513.

<sup>57</sup> BOD ¶507.

<sup>58</sup> Previously, the number of bishops assigned to each U.S. jurisdiction was determined by a membership-based formula. Under the 2016 *Book of Discipline* ¶404.2, "each jurisdiction having 300,000 church members or fewer shall be entitled to five bishops, and each jurisdiction having more than 300,000 church members shall be entitled to one additional bishop for each additional 300,000 church members or major fraction thereof." The Jurisdictional Study Committee (JSC), established by the 2016 General Conference, later proposed several reforms to the 2020/2024 General Conference. Among its key recommendations was to "discontinue a membership-based formula for determining the number of bishops in a jurisdiction and replace it with a process whereby each jurisdiction determines the number of bishops it needs and can financially support." (ADCA, Vol. 3, Supplement [2024], 1269). Acting on these recommendations, the 2020/2024 General Conference amended ¶404.2 to eliminate the numerical formula and institute a discernment-based process that considers a range of missional and contextual factors. The number of bishops is now to be determined "on the basis of missional reasons, as approved by the General Conference on recommendation of the Interjurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy" (BOD ¶404.2).

(Acts 15), regional conferences embody a similar conciliar discernment within constitutional form. This federal pattern resonates with Paul’s image of the church as ‘one body with many members’—diverse gifts ordered toward a common good (1 Cor 12:4–27; Rom 12:4–8), and ministries given ‘to equip the saints...for building up the body of Christ’ (Eph 4:11–13).

### **Episcopacy as Contextual Shepherding**

The restructured polity acknowledges that the primary locus of episcopal ministry is the region. Bishops are not abstract global administrators but pastors of pastors, rooted in the histories, cultures, and political realities of their areas. Currently, in Africa, episcopacy must address rapid growth and resource distribution; in Europe, the challenge is secularization and minority witness; in the United States, it is restructuring in light of disaffiliation, property disputes, and declining membership; and in the Philippines, episcopal leadership must balance indigenous mission with global Methodist identity. Regionalization honors this diversity by giving regions the authority to elect, size, and evaluate bishops according to local missional needs,<sup>59</sup> while the shared consecration ensures that bishops remain part of apostolic succession.<sup>60</sup> The Judicial Council has long affirmed that the *Discipline* is the church’s only official law book,<sup>61</sup> which means regional adaptations are legitimate only within the legal framework set by the Constitution and General Conference.<sup>62</sup>

### **Episcopacy as a Federal Office**

The episcopacy, like the wider structure of the UMC, becomes a federal office—one episcopal “special ministry, not separate order”<sup>63</sup> expressed in diverse constitutional forms. The *Book of Discipline* remains a connectional law book, but regions will adapt its provisions and govern episcopal tenure, accountability, and deployment in ways suited to their mission.<sup>64</sup> Thus, episcopal leadership operates as a ministry within the body rather than above it—ordered diversity under a shared consecration (1 Cor 12:12–26), so that unity is maintained not by uniformity but by the Spirit’s distribution of gifts for common edification (1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:3–6). This is not disunity but a theological recognition that the Spirit empowers the church in particular places, just as Wesley adapted Anglican polity for the American mission field in 1784. The episcopacy thus embodies a paradox: it is simultaneously one and many, consecrated in historic succession yet practiced through regional expressions of governance. In other words,

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<sup>59</sup> RP ¶¶31.2, 46; Const. ¶47.

<sup>60</sup> Const. ¶46.

<sup>61</sup> JCD 96 (1953): “The *Discipline* of The Methodist Church is a Book of Law, and the only official and authoritative Book of Law of The Methodist Church — ‘a body of laws pertaining to Church government,’ regulating every phase of the life and work of The Methodist Church, including regulations relating to its temporal economy and to the ownership, use and disposition of church property.”

<sup>62</sup> JCD 1272 (2014); JCD 1515 (2024).

<sup>63</sup> BOD ¶402.

<sup>64</sup> RP ¶¶31.5–7, 40, 46, 48–52.

regions can adapt and contextualize, but the “federal Constitution” sets the outer boundaries of episcopal governance.<sup>65</sup>

### **Episcopacy as Sign of Global Unity**

Despite regional diversification, consecration “in the historic manner” binds all bishops into one apostolic succession.<sup>66</sup> The ecclesial act of consecration unites bishops across continents, testifying that the church is still one body, though differently arranged. Here the episcopacy functions as a visible and theological sign of unity—an assurance that, even as laws, rituals, and missional strategies vary, the episcopal leadership of the church remains rooted in one shared covenant. The Judicial Council has insisted that no part of the church may act outside constitutional or legislative authority;<sup>67</sup> episcopal consecration, therefore, is not just ritual but a constitutional act grounding bishops in a common covenantal identity. And under the principle of legality, bishops are bound to apply church law consistently, ensuring that contextual variation never becomes arbitrary divergence.<sup>68</sup>

## **7. Challenges and Risks**

**Tenure Inequality.** Because life tenure attaches to bishops elected by jurisdictions in the U.S. while regional conferences outside the U.S. set their own terms, expectations for evaluation, rotation, and retirement may diverge across the connection.<sup>69</sup> Practically, this could affect leadership pipelines, succession planning, and perceived fairness in disciplinary or performance-based actions. Over time, pressure may build either to regionalize U.S. tenure practices or to harmonize minimum global norms through GC legislation that still respects regional prerogatives.

**Fragmentation Risk.** As regional courts and adapted regional *Disciplines* mature, different thresholds, processes, and outcomes for episcopal accountability could emerge.<sup>70</sup> The constitutional guardrails—non-adaptable matters reserved to GC (requiring a 60% supermajority) and Judicial Council constitutional review—are designed to keep the connection coherent.<sup>71</sup> The practical task will be distinguishing what is legitimately *regional* from what is *distinctively connectional*, and elevating the latter for GC action before variances harden into de facto schisms.

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<sup>65</sup> This federal principle is underscored by JCD 1449 (2022), which reaffirmed the General Conference’s authority under Const. ¶17.3 to define and fix the powers of annual conferences and the episcopacy.

<sup>66</sup> RP ¶46; Const. ¶47.

<sup>67</sup> JCD 1444 (2022).

<sup>68</sup> JCD 1366 (2018).

<sup>69</sup> RP ¶50; Const. ¶51.

<sup>70</sup> RP ¶31.6–7.

<sup>71</sup> RP ¶¶16.17, 56; Const. ¶¶17.3, 56-59.

**Council of Bishops' Future.** With regional Colleges of Bishops arranging supervision locally, the Council of Bishops risks being perceived as primarily consultative rather than directive.<sup>72</sup> Its global authority will largely turn on how effectively it coordinates emergency assignments, fosters common standards of practice, and exercises any GC-authorized accountability processes for individual bishops. A clearer articulation—by GC or by the Council's own covenantal instruments—of what must remain global could strengthen its integrative and coordinating role.

**Transferability.** Transfers and temporary/emergency assignments remain possible but are consent-based and exceptional, which may limit cross-regional leadership sharing.<sup>73</sup> Regions facing acute need (e.g., vacancy, disaster, or rapid growth) may still rely on the COB for interim coverage; however, building regional benches (sufficient numbers and diverse skill sets of bishops) becomes more critical. Regularizing short-term exchanges (e.g., learning residencies) within the consent framework could preserve a visible sign of global interdependence.

**Doctrinal Unity.** Regions may publish regional ritual and adapt certain ministerial standards while honoring the Restrictive Rules and constitutional limits.<sup>74</sup> The challenge is ensuring that contextual developments (e.g., marriage rites, qualifications for ordination, forms of ministry) do not erode doctrinal coherence or sacramental unity. Two practical tools here are: (1) transparent cross-region consultation before major changes, and (2) timely use of GC non-adaptable legislation when an issue truly rises to “distinctively connectional” significance.<sup>75</sup>

## 8. Opportunities for Renewal

**Contextual Legitimacy.** By allowing each region to elect its own bishops in number and tenure suitable to mission, episcopal leadership is no longer perceived as imposed by a distant legislative center but as grown from within the context itself.<sup>76</sup> Biblically, this reads as the Spirit's apportioning of gifts to particular members and localities (1 Cor 12:4–11), so that episcopal oversight can discern and deploy those gifts contextually while still serving the one body. This strengthens trust in the office, makes the bishop more accountable to the people they serve, and helps bridge gaps of cultural credibility that sometimes arose when episcopal structures were dictated externally.

**Missional Adaptability.** With the authority to determine boundaries of annual conferences and episcopal areas, regions may reorganize episcopal coverage in light of demographic shifts, political or legal realities, and missional needs.<sup>77</sup> For example, a fast-growing African conference

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<sup>72</sup> RP ¶¶48–49.

<sup>73</sup> RP ¶49; Const. ¶50.

<sup>74</sup> Const. ¶¶18–23 (Restrictive Rules); RP ¶31.5(d).

<sup>75</sup> RP ¶16.17; Const. ¶13.3; BOD ¶101.

<sup>76</sup> RP ¶¶31.2, 46; Const. ¶¶47, 51.

<sup>77</sup> RP ¶¶40, 48; Const. ¶¶40, 49.

may, with General Conference approval, elect more bishops to cover expansion, while a declining European context may restructure episcopal areas for sustainability. This adaptive flexibility mirrors Wesley's own principle of using structures "as prudence may direct" to spread the gospel.

**Theological Integrity.** By embedding unity-in-diversity within constitutional oversight, the plan permits contextual expressions of church life while protecting core doctrinal and constitutional commitments. The Restrictive Rules safeguard against alteration of doctrinal standards or Articles of Religion, while the Judicial Council provides a constitutional check when diversity threatens connectional coherence.<sup>78</sup> Thus, episcopacy can serve as a sacramental sign of unity across regions, demonstrating that connection does not require uniformity but does require fidelity to the shared covenant.

## Conclusion: Re-imagining the Episcopacy

The Regionalization Plan represents not a dismantling but a re-imagination of the episcopacy for a global, post-colonial, and pluralistic United Methodist Church. It affirms that episcopal leadership must be both contextually rooted and connectionally accountable. Authority is decentralized without abandoning connection; regions are empowered without severing the global covenant; and bishops are re-anchored in their own cultural soils while still bound together in one special ministry of elders.

The heart of this re-imagination lies in holding together two complementary identities. Bishops are called to be regional shepherds, accountable to their peoples, their regional law, and the particular missional contexts that shape their ministries. At the same time, bishops remain global signs of unity, consecrated "in the historic manner," and bound by the Constitution and the interpretive authority of the Judicial Council. This dual accountability embodies the Wesleyan vision of a church that is both catholic and particular: catholic in its global unity, particular in its local embodiment.

The theological challenge ahead will be to ensure that diversity of practice does not fracture the church's shared identity. The constitutional framework—especially the Restrictive Rules, the non-adaptable matters reserved to the General Conference, and the Judicial Council's role in safeguarding legality—provides the guardrails needed to preserve doctrinal integrity amid regional diversity.

Paul's vision of coordinated diversity (1 Cor 12:12–27) captures this dynamic well: many members and ministries, one body and head—*ex uno plures et e pluribus unum*.

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<sup>78</sup> RP ¶¶13, 16.17, 56; Const. ¶¶17.3, 18-23, 56-59.

In this sense, regionalization is not a concession to fragmentation but a constitutional strategy for holding unity in diversity. If lived faithfully, the episcopacy after regionalization may become the most visible embodiment of the church's constitutional theology: *unity without uniformity, connection without centralization, leadership without domination.*