

Global Methodists Want to Check Bishops

Ahead of the first general conference, the new denomination is weighing possible limits on leaders.

DANIEL SILLIMAN | MARCH 18, 2024

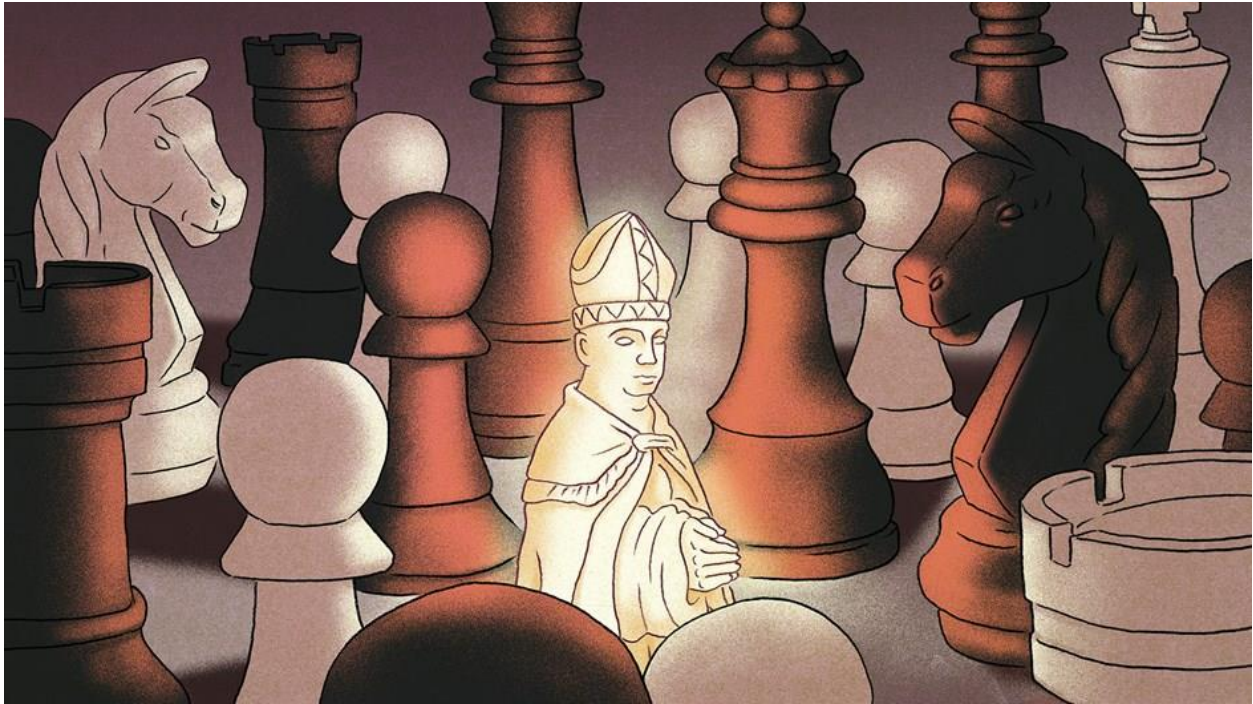


Image: Illustration by Tim Bouckley

There were too many meetings.

When Mike Lowry became a bishop in the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC) in 2008, he also became responsible for the governance of two universities, two seminaries, a hospital, and seven or eight other institutions.

“And I realized I could spend my entire professional life in committee meetings and board meetings and never enter a church,” Lowry told CT.

The new bishop believed in the work the Methodists were doing, but it didn’t seem right that the episcopal role should be so busy with bureaucracy. He felt bogged down.

“Bishops should be the champions and the guardians of the mission and orthodoxy, not administrative,” Lowry said. “But the way the office was structured, it was primarily an administrative management position.”

In 2022, Lowry **became** the first bishop to leave the UMC and join the new Global Methodist Church (GMC). The issue that drove the separation, for Lowry and the more than 1.9 million

Americans who [left](#) between 2019 and 2023, was same-sex marriages and LGBTQ clergy. In his letter of resignation, Lowry [wrote](#), “The institutional expression of the United Methodist Church has strayed in significant ways from faithfully upholding its own stated *Discipline* and, even more so, departed from the full truth of the gospel.”

But the bishop and many leaders of the GMC also saw serious structural problems with the UMC. The Methodists had adopted a corporate model of church governance, and bishops became bureaucrats instead of shepherds. Then, when some leaders strayed from traditional teaching on issues of human sexuality, there were no corrective mechanisms to check their authority. The General Conference voted not to change the denomination’s *Book of Discipline* and to keep the traditional stance, but the bishops over some regions announced they would just ignore it and affirm LGBTQ ministers. And there were no consequences.

“I would say the separation was as much about authority and accountability as it was about any theological issue,” said Keith Boyette, transitional head of the GMC.

The members of the new denomination are now preparing for their first annual gathering, a convening General Conference, to be held in Costa Rica in September. They’re not debating sexuality anymore. But they are wrestling with the question of bishops and the shape of the episcopacy.

What should governing roles look like? What responsibilities should a bishop have? And, most urgently, Boyette said, “What are you going to do to hold the bishops accountable?”

Some have been so hurt by the UMC hierarchy that they wonder “if the office is even salvageable,” according to Boyette. But the GMC is not considering doing away with the episcopal structure.

“You’re going to have somebody who’s in charge,” Boyette said. “You may call them something else—it’s not about the title; it’s about how you structure the office, how they’re selected, and how they’re held accountable—but you’re going to have that person.”

For a denomination that wants to recover an older expression of Wesleyanism, it also makes sense to construct an episcopal governance structure.

“You can’t reject what you see as a revisionist position on marriage and at the same time embrace revisionism on something much more important,” said Ryan Danker, director of the John Wesley Institute. “To change something as fundamental as the episcopacy, that’s a kind of reactionary pragmatism. That’s not Methodism. You’re not Methodists anymore.”

The Methodist history of bishops is a little complicated, however. John Wesley never became a bishop, and never called himself a bishop, but he believed he was ordained by God and exercised extensive authority over the Methodist movement, according to religious historian John Wigger.

In America, meanwhile, Francis Asbury was ordained as a Methodist bishop and claimed apostolic authority, but he also was elected by ministers at an annual conference.

“He took the title of bishop, but he made it more democratic,” said Wigger, who wrote a biography of Asbury. “In theory he was bishop and his word was final, but in practice he negotiated. He was pragmatic. And much of his authority came from the fact that people saw him as a servant—an old man on a horse with one change of clothes.”

For many of the faithful, churchgoing Methodists joining the GMC, these questions about bishops are all new.

They know someone is over their pastor. But they don't have positions on polity. Some Methodist laypeople say they only thought about the episcopacy when they wondered at the mysteries of ministerial appointments.

Others say they never thought about bishops until a few years ago.

“Not until they tried to start making us do things that weren't right,” said Angie Fary, a member of Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in High Point, North Carolina.

Still, many want to be part of a denomination with bishops. June Fulton, a lifelong member at Mt. Vernon Methodist in Trinity, North Carolina, said she was relieved when her congregation joined the GMC.

“The general consensus was, we don't want to be floating around out there,” Fulton said. “I thought we needed the direction and to be connected to something. I thought that would work better for us, and most everybody felt the same way.”

Caroline Franks, the GMC minister who serves at Mt. Vernon now, said that not having a bishop would be like “going out in the rain without a raincoat.”

But this year, GMC leadership will have to decide what kind of raincoat they want. They are, after all, designing it themselves.

David Watson, dean of United Theological Seminary and one of the members of the GMC's episcopacy task force, said one thing that's being considered is term limits. The convention may vote on a proposal that bishops won't have lifetime appointments but will be elected to a six-year term with the possibility of serving one additional term.

A lot of people in the GMC want congregations to have more of a role in choosing their ministers. Churches shouldn't have to just accept the bishops' appointments. And the task force is also considering offloading administrative responsibilities to the president pro tem and other officers elected or hired by the general and regional conferences.

Bishops in the GMC may not be assigned specific regions. That way, they could focus on teaching and spiritual leadership without the distraction of the minutiae of day-to-day

governance of a specific district. But perhaps they should be tethered to a place, so a bishop in Ohio isn't responsible for guarding the mission and orthodoxy of ministers in Kenya or a bishop in Bulgaria isn't overseeing a conference in Kentucky.

“All of this is theoretical,” Watson said. “Everything has to be ratified at the General Conference. We will decide these things as a church. But now is the time to build and plan and work.”

While the question of the shape of the episcopacy has provoked discussion and debate in the fledgling denomination, there's also a sense of unity, according to Watson. The details are being worked out, but everyone is in accord about the ultimate goal.

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“The main thing that people want to see,” he said, “is bishops as spiritual leaders who will preach and teach the faith, who will hold people under their charge accountable, and will be held accountable themselves.”

The specifics are, of course, important, and some have strong opinions about the right way to do things. Decisions that the GMC makes in 2024 will affect the denomination for years—perhaps generations—to come.

There will no doubt be challenges with accountability. And probably, for some bishops, too many meetings. But the newly christened Global Methodists, hoping for a vibrant future, say the real test will be faithfulness.

“I think we need a good checks-and-balances kind of system,” said Laura Ballinger, copastor of First Methodist Martinsville in Indiana, “but if they just love and follow Jesus and the Scripture, I'm good.”

Daniel Silliman is news editor for CT.