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Agency: GCOM

Title: Report of the Faith and Order Committee

Financial Implications: None

Report No. 22

Petition Number:

REPORT OF THE FAITH AND ORDER COMMITTEE

Background and Mandate

The proposal to establish a Faith and Order Commission (or Committee) was referred by the 2000 General Conference to the General Council on Ministries (GCOM) for further study. The Faith and Order committee was established within the GCOM structure to provide the vehicle in which this study was conducted. The text of the Calendar Item # 1545-427, DCA pg. 551 states: "The rationale behind the establishment of this Commission is the need of our church 'to strengthen our ability for dialogue and doctrinal discernment. . . a group to help lead the church and its doctrinal dialogue so that, to quote the words of the Discipline. . . ' It will assist the Council [of Bishops] in finding ways of fostering doctrinal reflection and theological dialogue at all levels of The United Methodist Church, thereby helping the church recover and update our distinctive doctrinal heritage, and thereby enabling doctrinal reinvigoration for the sake of authentic renewal, fruitful evangelism, ecumenical dialogue and social witness.'"

Process and Resolution

The Faith and Order Committee established by the GCOM met regularly throughout the quadrennium in conjunction with the scheduled general meetings of the Council to engage in the following tasks:

- ❑ Review the mandate of the 2000 General Conference and engage in a dialogue with the proponents of the petition: Dr. Scott Jones and Dr. Philip Wogaman;
- ❑ Identify the places within the church where theological and doctrinal dialogues are already happening;
- ❑ Examine the financial implications of establishing a separate commission on faith and order;
- ❑ Explore all the creative possibilities there are to address the needs being lifted up by the proposal;
- ❑ Study background literature and articles on faith and order produced by the World Council of Churches; and
- ❑ Craft a resolution to be presented to the 2004 General Conference.

The committee identified the following places where theological dialogues are already happening within The United Methodist Church:

- Small groups in local churches such as Bible study groups, Sunday school classes, youth groups, women and men study programs, schools of Christian mission, and many others.
- In the Annual Conference: most annual conferences include in their agenda and program theological discussion groups usually focusing on current urgent issues, such as homosexuality and Biblical authority. There are also some annual conferences that have regular "listening day" events as well as subject-focused discussion groups. Theological dialogues also happen during the clergy session of some annual conferences as well as in some legislative committee meetings. There are some annual conferences' clustering of churches that gather together on a regular basis to discuss theological issues.
- Internet dialogues: the use of list serves on the Internet as a forum for theological conversations is a current reality in many places.

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- Seminaries: practical and systematic theological classes are natural contexts for this kind of conversations. In almost all seminaries informal theological conversations happen in a variety of settings and among various kinds of people.
- The boards of ordained ministry: as candidates go through the process of ordination and are examined by the board of ordained ministry on their theological understanding, significant conversations happen. Members of the board who hold on to varying theological perspectives engage themselves in meaningful dialogues.
- Episcopal leadership: many Bishops of the church initiate theological conversations in a variety of ways. There are those who intentionally organize discussion groups and on-going task forces within their annual conferences. Some have written significant theological books that have been used in seminaries, local churches, and other contexts.
- Publications: church newsletters, church agency publications, denominational magazines and many others have provided venues and resources for presentation of theological positions and spurred stimulating conversations.
- General boards and agencies: the various boards and agencies of the church have inevitably and intentionally dealt with theological issues in various ways. For example, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry has gathered the various seminary professors teaching in the field of Methodist doctrine, theology and history for several days of theological dialogue.
- Christian education curricula: the General Board of Discipleship in cooperation with the United Methodist Publishing House produces church education curricular materials that assist in creative and effective theological conversations.
- Christian formation groups: theological conversations also happen within Christian formation groups such as Walk to Emmaus, Faith Quest, Christian Ashram, and in many other spiritual retreats.
- College campus ministries: young people are engaged in dealing with theological issues in various college campuses and campus ministries either through the facilitation of Wesley Foundation or through specific courses offered by the schools.
- The General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns sees theological dialogue as central to its mission and purpose and has, therefore, organized various theological conferences.

In response to the mandate of 2000 General Conference to study the proposal to establish a separate commission on faith and order, four options were identified by the committee:

- * Status quo: that is, to continue what is presently happening in various parts of the church and not to support the establishment of a separate commission.
- * The Council of Bishops as the locus for creation of this committee, lifting up *The Book of Discipline* provision indicating that the Bishops are given the responsibility for these dialogues to happen (§414).
- * The “Connectional Table” that the General Council on Ministries is proposing for the re-structuring of the general boards and agencies of the church;
- * Both the Council of Bishops and the “Connectional Table” be assigned the responsibility of making sure that theological dialogues happen within the church.

The committee expressed consensus on the following value assumption:

We value theological discourse permeating every level and work of the church. Therefore, we do not recommend locating the responsibility for theological dialogue in just one commission or agency.

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The committee agreed with the proponents of the petition in their observation that “serious doctrinal and theological debates rage within the church. . .and. . .clearly there is a need for more disciplined study in a thoughtful atmosphere of mutual respect. [J. Philip Wogaman, in a letter to Rev. Dick Jones, co-chair of the GCOM Committee on Faith and Order, dated October 4, 2001]. However, the committee believes that the establishment of a separate commission:

- ❑ does not guarantee that doctrinal and theological discussions will happen at all levels of church life;
- ❑ does not guarantee “respect for diversity of opinions held by conscientious persons of faith” [*The Book of Discipline, 2000*, ¶102, p. 51: “Wesley followed the time-tested approach: ‘In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.’”];
- ❑ may give the impression that the “theological task” is reserved only for “recognized expertise” or “theological specialists” rather than for the whole people of God [*The Book of Discipline, 2000*, ¶104, p.75: “Our theological task is both individual and communal. . .”];
- ❑ might not respond adequately to the “rich quality of our church. . .its global character. . .enriched by indigenous experiences and manners of expression.” [*The Book of Discipline*, ¶104, page 83].

The committee has presented to the General Council on Ministries a resolution to be submitted to the 2004 General Conference that:

- Affirms the disciplinary role of the bishops and the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns to “be the focal points for responsible conversation in the denomination on theological matters;”
- Affirms existing training events and models for dialogue that the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns has developed and already employs within the life of the Church;
- Encourages the church at all levels to offer models and training of leaders on how to facilitate biblical and theological dialogues; and
- Urges every general agency of the church to incorporate within its training of church leadership models of biblical and theological discourse, including reflection upon the diversity within The United Methodist Church.

Signed: _____
Bishop Edward W. Paup, President

Signed: _____
Daniel K. Church, General Secretary