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Agency: GCOM  
Title: Report and Recommendations on Special Days  
Financial Implications: None

## **Report No. 6**

Petition Number:

## **REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON SPECIAL DAYS**

### **Background and Mandate**

The General Council on Ministries (GCOM) has the responsibility *“to recommend to the General Conference, after consultation with the Council of Bishops, the number and timing of special days which are to be observed on a churchwide basis;”* (*The Book of Discipline, 2000, ¶ 906.7*).

The General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) has the responsibility *“to make recommendations to the General Conference, in consultation with the General Council on Ministries and the Council of Bishops, regarding any offerings to be received in connection with special days observed on a churchwide basis. These recommendations shall include the number and timing of such special days with offerings, the amount, if any...”* (*The Book of Discipline, 2000, ¶ 807.3*)

### **Process**

A consultation on special Sundays was co-sponsored by the GCFA and GCOM in October 2002. The consultation included selected members from the two Councils, representatives from the general agencies and the Council of Bishops, and other interested parties. The consultation included reports on the financial giving for the special Sundays with churchwide offering, the promotion and interpretation provided by United Methodist Communications, and reports on all special Sunday observances by the general agencies responsible for their administration. A request was received from the General Commission on Archives and History to change the observance date for Heritage Sunday to Aldersgate Day (May 24<sup>th</sup>) or the Sunday preceding. The General Commission on United Methodist Men brought a proposal for a United Methodist Men’s MENistry Sunday, and the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits brought a report from the Global Pensions Task Force to a possible request for a special Sunday dedicated to global pensions that would give individual United Methodists at all levels an opportunity to both support and participate in the global pensions system. Correspondence was also received from United Methodists expressing concern over the number of special Sundays, and recommending that no more be added. The GCFA and GCOM task force members observed that most annual conferences have designated additional special Sunday observances, and it is difficult for United Methodist members and pastors to distinguish those set by the General Conference from those approved by annual conferences and other church bodies.

The GCFA and GCOM task force members agreed to recommend the change in observance date for Heritage Sunday, but felt that other requests should only be recommended after General Conference had acted to approve such observances.

The task force members requested that the report to General Conference include the achievements of the special Sundays and to help United Methodists to learn about available responses to promote and enhance their observance.

## **The Significance and Achievements of Special Sundays**

### Special Churchwide Sundays with Churchwide Offerings

#### 1. *Human Relations Day*

- Significant way to demonstrate how local congregations and community groups are engaged in ministry in their communities and in the world.
- Through ministries supported by the offering, significant numbers of persons have been reclaimed for Jesus Christ from helplessness, homelessness, hopelessness, poverty, racism, poor health and hunger.
- The offering supports projects such as transitional housing for persons as the church assists these persons to pursue permanent housing, education, and other steps toward self sufficiency; support for immigrant families; and advocacy for moderate and low income community residents to seek government support for appropriate housing. More information is available through the General Board of Global Ministries.
- The Youth Offender Rehabilitation programs include one-to-one mentoring for at-risk and first time offender youth through providing spiritual direction, skills training and social development. These programs offer services such as substance abuse treatment, attitude/anger management, conflict resolution techniques, social skills, social networking training, job readiness and training, and self-esteem. More information about these is available through the General Board of Church and Society.
- Ministries supported have often served as a compelling gateway toward Christian ministry for lay and clergy leaders.

#### 2. *One Great Hour of Sharing*

- This offering is the only local congregation source of donor undesignated funds for the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). It provides the staff and administrative support to enable The United Methodist Church to respond upon receipt of a request from the bishops and Methodist Church Presidents throughout the world, rather than waiting several weeks for the collection of special funds through special appeals or donations.
- The strictly designated funds given to UMCOR are used in the field for disaster response, relief and development projects around the world. These funds could not be totally given for relief efforts without the One Great Hour of Sharing offering and other undesignated gifts.
- Since 1993, UMCOR not only funds local disaster response organizations, but also is implementing large-scale responses such as post-war reconstruction in such places as Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Iraq.

#### 3. *World Communion Sunday*

- During the 2001-2004 quadrennium a portion of this offering designated for the Crusade Scholarship Program has enabled 77 students from racial/ethnic communities in the United States and 29 international students from around the world to prepare for leadership through graduate study such as theology, medicine and health care, evangelism, peace, justice, democracy, education, sustainable development, conflict resolution, and business administration.

- On average each year more than 500 African American, Asian, Hispanic and Native American students who are active in their local church receive scholarships through this program.
- It enables the recruitment of ethnic minority persons into ordained ministry, scholarships and in-service training grants.
- Funds are designated to support and encourage ethnic lay, diaconal, licensed, commissioned, and ordained ministers to grow personally, professionally, and spiritually through the Ethnic In-Service Training program.

4. *United Methodist Student Day*

- During the past three years, an average of 550 students have been recipients of scholarships funded from United Methodist Student Day, 475 students were awarded United Methodist Scholarships by the college or university and 75 were student recipients of the Conference Merit Scholarship.
- For the past three years an average of 1,100 students received loans.
- Ten percent of the United Methodist Student Day offerings are rebated to the annual conferences for the Conference Merit Scholarships to undergraduate students enrolled at United Methodist colleges and universities. Of the remaining amount, 90% is allocated to the 124 colleges, universities and seminaries for scholarship awards and 10% is used for the United Methodist Student Loan Program.

5. *Peace with Justice Sunday*

- This Sunday helps United Methodists to examine how their faith relates to issues of war, peace, and justice throughout the world. It provides education on subjects of peace with justice.
- Annual conferences retain half of the offering to support ministries within their annual conference.
- The General Board of Church and Society dedicates approximately one-third of its Peace with Justice grants to Central Conference peace making activities.

6. *Native American Ministries Sunday*

- Native Americans attending United Methodist and other approved schools of theology receive scholarships.
- This offering helps Native American ministries to become more self-sufficient. Native people are encouraged to attend events that will strengthen their ministry.
- Conference committees are helping raise awareness to Native American issues and needs. Half of the offering is retained by the annual conference to develop and strengthen Native American ministries within the annual conference
- This Sunday observance has motivated many churches to greater involvement with Native Americans through participation in the Advance Special Program or by sending Volunteers in Mission teams to work with a Native American community.

Special Sundays without Churchwide Offerings

1. *Heritage Sunday*

- Offers opportunities for reflection on our United Methodist heritage through our collective memory as a church, celebrate where we've been, and envision how it shapes us today.

- Many churches use the materials prepared for Heritage Sunday in confirmation classes.
- The General Commission on Archives and History prepares resource materials to assist congregations in their observance of this day. When Heritage Sunday coincides with other church observances, themes are chosen which support both celebrations.

2. *Laity Sunday*

- Reminds laity of their call to ministry and their leadership in ministry.
- Provides for a way for laity to recognize their role as worship leaders and speakers.
- Some congregations pair Laity Sunday with other congregational observances such as homecoming or stewardship emphases.

Sundays for Annual Conference Observation

1. *Christian Education Sunday*

- Helps congregations to recognize the importance of the church's teaching and learning ministry. It reinforces the concept that we are on a journey of life-long learning as disciples of Jesus Christ.
- Many congregations use this Sunday to dedicate teachers and leaders in the educational ministry of the congregation. Others pair this with Rally Day and encourage all to commit or recommit to learning opportunities.
- Many use this Sunday as a time to present Bibles to children and remind the congregation of the importance of Bible reading and study.
- Funds raised from conference Christian Education offering support Christian Education programs and leadership training.

2. *Golden Cross Sunday*

- This observance represents Christ's healing presence in a hurting world.
- Conference offerings on Golden Cross Sunday are used to insure and extend the church's efforts to increase health and wholeness for older persons, women, children and youth, and persons with disabilities.
- Many conferences use funds to support after-school care for children, scholarships for students pursuing health-related careers, treatment for drug and alcohol abusers, and advocacy programs for emerging critical health issues. Due to lack of adequate health insurance, some conferences use funds for emergency services for people in need.

3. *Rural Life Sunday*

- This Sunday highlights the importance of "the land" in Christian and United Methodist theology and heritage, including God's creation, our human dependence upon the bounty of the earth, and our ecological stewardship.
- It acknowledges the rural heritage of United Methodism and the fact that 25,000 of our congregations are in small towns and rural communities.
- It provides opportunity to address the global challenges in economic, education, health care, and housing faced by people in rural areas.
- It affirms the interdependence of rural and urban congregations and communities.

4. *Disabilities Awareness Sunday*

- This Sunday provides opportunities for congregations to launch or extend their caring and compassion for people with disabilities.

- As the United Methodist Church seeks to have “open hearts, open minds, open doors,” we must move beyond opening the door to welcoming all of God’s children into our church by removing the physical and attitudinal barriers, whether real or perceived.
- Accessibility includes providing ramps, lifts and elevators. It includes providing assistive listening devices, interpreters, and real time captioning to people whom are deaf or hard of hearing. It includes providing hymnals, bulletins, and Bibles in large print or Braille for blind or those with low vision to see clearly.

## **Recommendations**

1. To retain the six churchwide Special Sundays with offerings (i.e. Human Relations Day, One Great Hour of Sharing, World Communion Sunday, United Methodist Student Day, Peace with Justice Sunday, and Native American Ministries Sunday).
2. To observe Heritage Sunday as a churchwide Special Sunday without offering, but to change the observance date to Aldersgate Day (May 24) or the Sunday preceding that date. The day provides an opportunity for reflection on heritage, celebration of where the Church has been, how it understands itself as it shapes us today, and the meaning of Christian conferencing. Heritage Sunday calls the Church to remember the past by committing itself to the continuing call of God.

Changing the observance of Heritage Sunday from April 23 to May 24 would address the concerns of the variability of Easter Sunday. The General Commission on Archives and History, the GCOM and the GCFA acknowledged that more United Methodists are familiar with Aldersgate Day than with the union of the Evangelical Brethren Church and the Methodist Church and would be more likely to celebrate their heritage on Aldersgate Day rather than on April 23<sup>rd</sup>.

3. To continue Laity Sunday as a churchwide Special Sunday without offering.
4. To delete Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday as a churchwide Special Sunday without offering.

When the General Conference designated this special Sunday, no agency was specifically assigned the supervision or promotion of the observance. Thus, it has rarely been observed in local churches. The GCOM and GCFA felt it would be better to have a more broadly focused observance than on this singular issue, but was not prepared to make a recommendation to the 2004 General Conference.

5. To retain the four Sundays for annual conference observation (i.e. Christian Education Sunday, Golden Cross Sunday, Rural Life Sunday, and Disability Awareness Sunday).

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Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
Bishop Edward W. Paup, President

Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
Daniel K. Church, General Secretary