



"From Where I Sit ..."

What Should We Know ... And When Should We Know It?

By the time you read this article, the 37th Quadrennial Session and the 38th General Conference will have adjourned with the scheduled election of three new Bishops and from one to possibly five new General Officers. As the celebrations begin to subside and the new work begins, I choose to pose the title of this article as a question for the future, and it is a question that has troubled me and perhaps others for quite some time. It is a delicate question that is ripe with political complications so I broach the subject gently and hopefully at a time that is least threatening. Why is this time least threatening? The reason is simple. Unless this General Conference has chosen to elect a Bishop who has only four years to serve before mandatory retirement, the General Conference of 2018 (at the time of this writing) is not scheduled to have an election for the episcopacy. *[Note: Should this schedule hold and there not be an election in 2018, this will be the first time in 28 years (the General Conference of 1990) and only the second time since 1942 where during a general conference an election of a Bishop will not have occurred.]* Hence my belief that this might be the least threatening time, or perhaps I should say in a more positive vernacular, our best opportunity to objectively hear this question.

"What should we know ... and when should we know it?" is a question that frames one of the most important decisions we make and continue to make as CME's. In the process of choosing and electing connectional officials as Bishops, General Officers, and even (if you will) members of the Judicial Council, we make grave decisions about who will lead our Zion, develop and implement our departmental programs, and interpret our laws. But what do we know of them at the time of election? Now I would dare not say that we would elect someone about whom we know nothing all. Quite the contrary! We all know something about every candidate who offers him or herself for service. No, the greater point of the question is, "Do we know enough about the candidates to make an informed decision and more directly do we each have enough common knowledge of the individual strengths and/or weaknesses of the candidates who offer themselves?"

Well now I've done it! I've said enough to get myself in trouble, so let me try to explain myself out of it. I have attended every general conference since the General Conference of 1974 in Philadelphia where I was an alternate clergy delegate and served as a teller in the episcopal election of the late Bishops Caesar Coleman, Joseph Coles and John Exum. In those days, most of the candidates (especially the serious candidates) had gone to great lengths to prepare themselves and had been groomed by the leadership of the Church. By grooming, I mean more than supporting the election of their candidates. By grooming, I mean they had been placed to be trained, positioned to learn the Church, and counseled to appreciate the importance of servant-leadership (whether as a Bishop or other connectional officer). And for the serious candidates, timing was important. I remember in 1981, I wanted to offer myself as a candidate for a General Office and, among others, I sought the support and counsel of the late Bishop Chester Kirkendoll. And even though he was not my Bishop, he counseled me not to run and said to me that I would only hurt myself in a futile effort "to get my name out there." It was wise counsel and I immediately withdrew my efforts. Perhaps my adherence of his counsel is the reason why a year later he would nominate me to be elected by the College of Bishops to the four year position of Administrative Coordinator for the administration of the Lilly Endowment funded project on Restructure of the CME Church.

Back to the question of "What should we know ... and when should we know it?" As pertains to Bishops and as often stated by retired Bishop Othal Lakey, the 2010 Discipline of the CME Church ¶426 (p. 114) states "The following is the method for constituting a Bishop:

“§1. A Bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church shall be constituted by the election of the General Conference and the laying on of hands of three Bishops or at least one Bishop and two Elders.

“§2. The Bishop-Elect shall be required to furnish a birth certificate or satisfactory proof of age, before consecration to the Episcopacy.”

These appear to be the only two requirements for a “person” to become a Bishop. I say “person” because there is not even the apparent requirement of the potential Bishop to be a preacher, an Elder, or even an itinerant Elder. The first requirement is solely to get elected and the second requirement is proof of age prior to consecration. And based on the trickle-down theory, if this is all that is specifically required of a Bishop, then the requirements for other offices could be perceived to be even less.

What should we know ...? In my conversations with others, it seems apparent that there are some basic pieces of information we ought to know when considering a person for the office of Bishop, such as:

1. The age of the candidate (to know for certain how long he or she may potentially serve)
2. The tenure of the candidate in the itinerate ministry
3. The Episcopal Districts served (to indicate geographic knowledge of the Church)
4. Annual Conference offices held (to indicate experience of Annual Conference operations)
5. Educational attainment and institutions attended
6. Theological training, institutions attended, and degrees earned

And the list could continue based on the personal perspective of the persons engaged in conversation. But certainly these six pieces of information would represent a solid core of beginning information that could and I believe should be shared with those who would vote to elect our leaders of the future. Bear in mind that these are primarily objective questions that do not speak to the character of the candidate nor the expertise gleaned from referenced experiences. However, responses to these questions do indicate a degree of exposure that does enhance the current required criteria and does provide an initial foundation for more serious consideration. In the meantime, questions that speak to the character of a candidate could be posed in a different venue or in subsequent one-on-one conversations.

Now the question comes “... When should we know it?” And the answer comes in two parts. One part concerns the need for a deadline for persons to commit to candidacy. Interested parties cannot expect to reasonably know the necessary information about the candidates until they are certain that they know who the candidates are. Hence the need for a deadline for candidacy. A possible deadline could be December 31st of the year preceding the General Conference or even January 31st of the year of the General Conference. Other dates may be more preferable. The second part concerns a timing when “basic” information may be commonly shared. By commonly shared, I mean that there should be a time and a place when responses to selected, predetermined questions or criteria may be found and reviewed by any interested constituent (especially delegates, alternates and other leaders of the Church). Such a sharing of common data could be prepared and distributed by the end of March of the year of the General Conference using the Church’s web page and/or appropriate print media. The current reality is that for some new delegates, much that is to be discovered about some candidates is discovered often within hours of an election (which is too late to be vetted) while other pertinent information only comes to light after the election.

The question may also be asked, “Is it reasonable to expect that this can be done?” What many CME’s may not be aware of, and I’m not sure how long the practice has been in place, but our brothers and sisters in the AME Church do require and have been requiring all candidates who wish to be eligible for election to the office of Bishop or General Officer to submit to their General Secretary (who holds the title of Chief Information Officer) certain required credentials and data by a specified date. So I would have to say, “Yes, we can!”

Now why is this important to me as the General Secretary of the General Board of Personnel Services? As General Secretary, it is my responsibility to assist the Church in the procurement of insurance in several classes, one of which is Directors and Officers Liability Insurance. And in this day of increased litigation, as demonstrated by the rash of claims in the Roman Catholic Church, insurance companies are becoming far more cautious about the potential risk of lawsuits brought against church leaders even when acting in their respective roles as elected officials of the Church (i.e. directors of the Corporation). In the effort to secure adequate insurance coverage with a reasonable premium, applying organizations are being called upon to produce documentation that convinces the insuring company that these officials have been well chosen and present less of a risk of loss. This is not to say that these officials are expected to be perfect. Perfection is a goal of Methodism, not of insurance. The goal of insurance is to minimize (or shift) risk. Having such a process in place that would allow us to “Know what we should know ... and to know when we should know it” would allow us to perhaps make more informed decisions and would allow us to communicate to insuring companies that such a process is in place which (among other reasons) has the intention to help reduce the risk of loss.

I have spent a great deal of effort on this topic and I do hope that it has not fallen on deaf ears. As previously stated, this is an important matter and should not be taken lightly. The end result will have financial implications and, more importantly, implications on the future of the CME Church. Our Church is a great Church, called of God as the Bride of Christ and we should never be content to rest on our laurels. There is always room for growth! Or at least that’s the way it looks to me ...

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*(Copies of earlier articles may be found on the
Personnel Services Webpage of the CME Website at www.thecmechurch.org)*