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# Petition 8 Jurisdictions Study Brief

January 2026 | Grace Sill



Connectional Table  
The United Methodist Church

## Fostering Equitable Relationships in The UMC by Examining the Future of Jurisdictions

Regionalization is the first step in decolonizing The United Methodist Church's (The UMC) institutional structures, but the existence of jurisdictions in the United States (US) must be addressed as well. Petition 8 of Worldwide Regionalization charged the Connectional Table and the Standing Committee of Regional Conference Matters Outside the US to facilitate a study to discern the future of the jurisdictions both inside and outside the United States. To prepare for this work, the Connectional Table, mandated by ¶905.6 of the Book of Discipline to provide leadership in research, set out to conduct interviews with diverse leaders across the connection. The results of these interviews provide a starting place for this vital work entrusted to the Connectional Table and the Standing Committee. These interviews with United Methodists in 2025 show that the divisive nature of jurisdictions currently contributes to inequitable relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

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In 1939, the race-based Central Jurisdiction was created as a controversial compromise to facilitate the merger of the Methodist Protestant Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church South. The Central Jurisdiction prevented black and African American bishops in the U.S. from itinerating to white, southern churches. In 1968, the Central Jurisdiction was eliminated as a requirement for the Evangelical United Brethren Church to merge with The Methodist Church. The Central Jurisdiction institutionalized segregation in The Methodist Church, but it also uplifted black and African American clergy and leadership. The elimination of the Central Jurisdiction also eliminated pathways for Black and African American leadership. Since 1939, the racism and colonialism embedded in Methodist institutional structures has been repeatedly studied and interrogated. Yet, previous studies commissioned by General Conference have been unable to initiate changes to The UMC's polity and structures.

As a result, The UMC has "created places and spaces for power to become centralized." Now, the ratification of regionalization, membership decline in the U.S. and growth in Africa, and declining financial resources urge The UMC to address the legacies of racism and colonialism that persist in jurisdictions. The key questions our interviews sought to answer are:

- **Should jurisdictions be kept in the U.S., and if so, in what form?**
- **Do the Regional Conferences outside of the U.S. desire jurisdictions?**
- **How can The UMC prepare for potential structural changes to the jurisdictions?**

Questions or Comments?

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## METHODS

This qualitative study was organized by the Connectional Table from July 2025–December 2025 and conducted by United Ministries Intern Grace Sill. A few interviewees from Africa, Europe, and the Philippines submitted written responses to questions to accommodate language barriers and schedules. This study intentionally reached out to laity and clergy who represent various UMC caucuses and groups and diverse racial-ethnic, age, and gender identities.

### INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS:

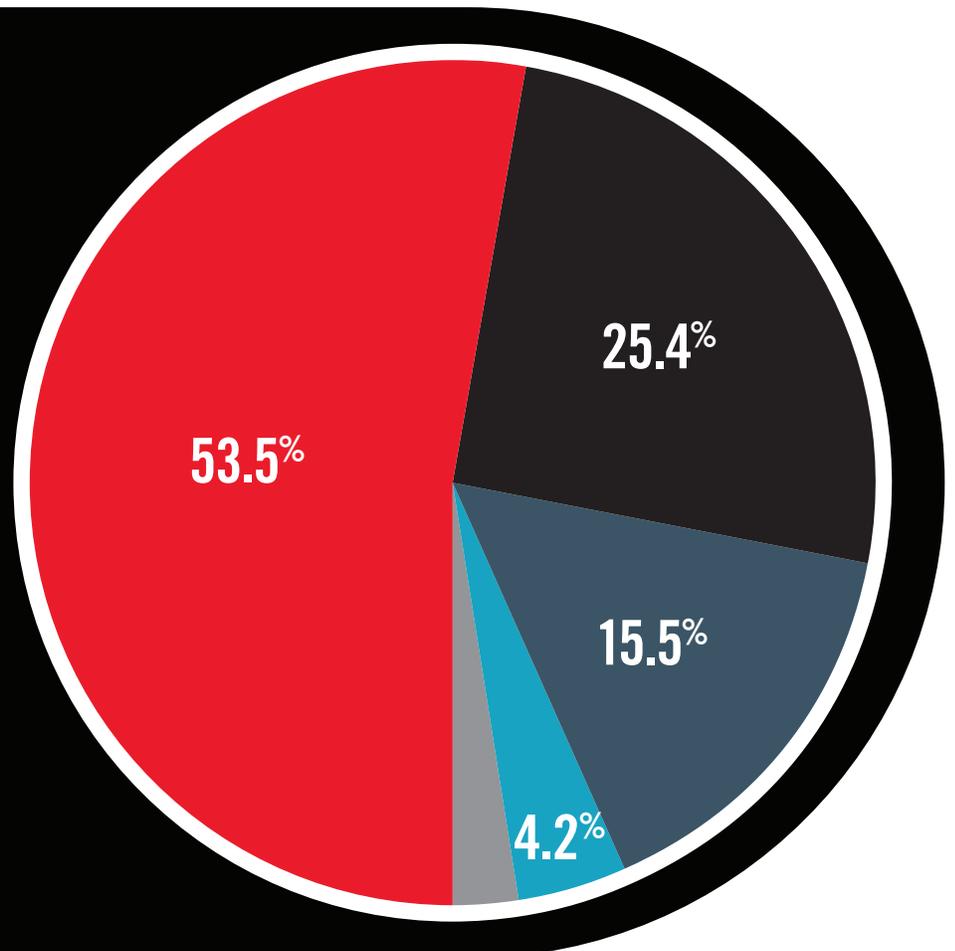
71 Interviewees

13 General Boards and Agencies

10 Bishops

Members of the following groups:

- Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters
- Interjurisdictional Episcopacy Committee
- Christmas Covenant
- Reconciling Ministries Network
- Black Methodists for Church Renewal
- Pacific Islander National Caucus of United Methodists
- Young People's Connectional Network



“Our understanding of God is incomplete **without other people whom God works through.**”

- White
- Black
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/ Latinx
- Indigenous American

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## RESULTS

Based on our interviews, the majority of U.S. United Methodists interviewed support the future elimination or amendment of jurisdictions. Justifications for jurisdictions include: (1) they uplift regional representation and ministry needs, and (2) they conduct U.S. bishops' elections more effectively than a national election could. Yet, jurisdictions discourage cross-jurisdictional bishop appointments and ministry partnerships. Jurisdictions reinforce divisions that have allowed white churches in the U.S. to centralize power based on higher memberships and/or financial resources. Since jurisdictions were created to separate, they reinforce a lack of trust. Interviewees stated that we are accountable to repent for this racist history and its legacies. The recent tension from appointing an SEJ bishop to an NEJ annual conference is an example of the jurisdictions' lack of trust. There is also a secondary concern about whether jurisdictions are financially sustainable in the U.S. and other regions.



**“What might it look like to lean into the very best part of our identity and dream the next possibility?”**

### KEY FINDINGS:

1. Most US members interviewed supported eliminating or amending jurisdictions after General Conference 2028.
2. 95% of Africans, Europeans, and Filipinos interviewed did not support implementing jurisdictions in their region.

All interviewees from Europe and the Philippines did not support the idea of expanding jurisdictions to their region. Many stated that each region should have the autonomy to decide whether their region has jurisdictions, but all the interviewees believed that their current institutional structures meet their needs.

The majority of Africans believed that the current proposal for regionalization is a good step towards equity between the U.S. and Africa and jurisdictions would not benefit Africa. However, there were varying beliefs on whether Africa should conference as one continent. Many Africans also stated that while they seek to increase their financial autonomy, their structural needs should neither be limited by their current financial abilities nor determined by the U.S.

As a qualitative study, this study does not speak for all United Methodists in a region. While interviewees represented a diversity of identities and UMC organizations, U.S. members comprise most interviewees. Study participants were contacted in English through email and these are not the dominant methods of communication in many regions of The UMC. Conducting interviews in English also contributed to misunderstandings of jurisdictions in interviews with United Methodists outside of the U.S. Three different understandings of the jurisdictions appeared in interviews: jurisdictions as defined by the Book of Discipline, jurisdictions as understood by people outside of the U.S., and jurisdictions as understood by people from the United States. Interviewees had different levels of familiarity with the jurisdictions that were based on their personal experiences and/or researching United Methodist polity. Several interviewees from outside of the U.S. stated that they read the Book of Discipline to reflect on jurisdictions in their region, while others cited the legal definition of “jurisdiction.” U.S. interviewees often cited their personal experiences to support their beliefs. Both U.S. and non-U.S. participants needed clarification that the current proposals for regionalization do not currently affect the jurisdictions.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from these interviews support the idea that The UMC should initiate a denominational-wide time of repentance and discernment on racism and colonialism in the Church in collaboration with the Connectional Table and the General Boards and Agencies. Jurisdictions, as they currently exist, are not believed to support ministry and mission. However, regionalization must be further solidified before addressing jurisdictions. Once it is more clear how regionalization will affect current structures, The UMC can courageously re-imagine if another structure better supports regional ministry, regional relationships, and the U.S. episcopacy than jurisdictions. A time of repentance and discernment will prepare the Church to be theologically transformed before proposing changes in jurisdictional polity and legislation at General Conference 2032 or 2036.

Without undergoing an intentional time of theological transformation and discernment, The UMC risks implementing harmful structural changes whose consequences have not been fully addressed. Such harmful structural change occurred when the Central Jurisdiction was eliminated in 1968 because the white majority in The UMC did not ensure African American and black representation would be protected in the racially integrated UMC. In discussing the future of the jurisdictions, United Methodists from the U.S. must trust other regions, especially Africa, to determine their regions' structural needs. Some U.S. interviewees stated they were open to expanding jurisdictions if Africa could fund it without U.S. aid. The effects of racism and colonialism were frequently cited for diminishing the decision making power of nonwhite and non-U.S. peoples in The UMC, and many Africans and Filipinos perceive this as U.S. colonial oversight over UMC structures. As a connectional church, each region outside of the U.S. stated that the U.S. could learn from them as models that exist without jurisdictions.

The Connectional Table was named by interviewees as a neutral space to facilitate conversations on racism and de-colonialism with United Methodists from across the connection. We celebrate the variety of conversations that are occurring. The Connectional Table is committed to working with our collaborative partners to provide space for these conversations, as we together support these efforts. Confronting racism and de-colonialism in The UMC reflects The UMC's vision to "Love Boldly, Serve Joyfully, Lead Courageously."

Overall, U.S. members believe The UMC's financial resources and diverse relationships would better support ministry by innovating a new structure between Annual Conferences and the U.S. Regional Conference that supports programmatic ministry, relationship-building, and regional Episcopal elections. Connectionalism is a part of our Wesleyan heritage and The UMC is strengthened by the diversity of its members. Our Wesleyan heritage can help us "dream the next possibility" by showing us a model of conferencing and polity that is relational and focused on innovative ministry and relationship building rather than amending the *Discipline*.

## FUTURE QUESTIONS

1. How can U.S. Bishops be elected without jurisdictions?
2. How can we keep jurisdictions' ability to develop relationships while removing bureaucracy? Can we elevate jurisdictional life and lose the bureaucratic aspect?
3. Who could be harmed or lose power and voice through proposed structural changes?
4. How can the church celebrate the unity in our diversity?
5. How do we confront the racist history and contexts of jurisdictions that continue to permeate The UMC?
6. What is that space between a Regional Conference and an Annual Conference that would allow for conversations to happen at a higher level, but still with fair representation and better systems of power?