

1021-16 Request for a Ruling of Law

Rio Texas Annual Conference Session June 11, 2021

The bishop has received an episcopal question of law from Rev. John Feagins, clergy from La Trinidad UMC in San Antonio. The question regards Report VI in your pre-conference report.

Rev. Feagins' request reads:

Since the merger of the Rio Grande and Southwest Texas Conference in 2014, each session of the Rio Texas Conference has received a pre-conference report stating that the policy for equitable compensation governing the distribution of equitable compensation is that which was adopted in 2014.

In the 2021 Pre Conference Report, this language appears as Report VI: Equitable Compensation Policies, page 18, lines 16-19 - "For Information Only"

REPORT VI

EQUITABLE COMPENSATION POLICIES *FOR INFORMATION ONLY*

- 16 The Río Texas Conference Equitable Compensation Policy is as adopted in the Journal of the Special Session of the Southwest Texas
- 17 and Rio Grande Conferences, February 8, 2014, pages 81 through 110. The Called Special Session Journal is available at
- 18 <https://riotexas.org/annual-conference-journal-rio-texas-conference>. The Equitable Compensation Policy is also available in the Rio
- 19 Texas Conference Policy Manual.

While the Discipline grants the commission on equitable compensation authority to recommend a policy to the annual conference, the Discipline grants authority to receive, amend, and adopt that policy to each *annual* conference (par. 621, par. 625).

The practice of the Rio Texas Commission on Equitable Compensation cites the action of a past annual conference as creating binding policy upon this conference, undermining the authority of this conference to review, amend, and perfect this policy in light of missional context, systemic bias, impact on local churches and clergy, and the relative financial priorities of the conference itself.

As such, I raise the following question of law:

Does Report VI (p. 18, lines 16-19) undermine the authority of this session of the Rio Texas Annual Conference to review, discuss, debate, amend, perfect and adopt the Rio Texas Conference policy for equitable compensation in light of matters of missional context, systemic bias, impact on local churches and clergy, and relative financial priorities of the conference budget? Is the Rio Texas Equitable Compensation Commission obligated by Discipline to include its recommended policy as a "for conference action" item to the Rio Texas Conference on an annual basis?

This request requires no action by the conference today, but the bishop will respond to the question within the 30-day period prescribed by the Book of Discipline and will forward the question to the Judicial Council.

References:

¶621

¶ 621. Apportionment Distribution—Each annual conference shall determine what plan and method shall be used in distributing the apportionments to its several districts and charges for the Episcopal Fund (¶ 818.1), for the support of district superintendents and conference claimants, and for the Equitable Compensation Fund (¶ 625).⁷⁷

¶625

3. The commission shall carefully study the needs for additional support within the conference and the sources of income and shall recommend annually to the conference for its action a schedule of minimum base compensation for all full-time pastors or those clergy members of the annual conference appointed less than full-time to a local church, subject to such rules and regulations as the conference may adopt (¶ 338.1, .2).⁷⁹

United Methodist Church. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016 . The United Methodist Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

DECISION OF LAW

In Response to Questions of Law Posed by the Rev. John Feagins During The 2021 Annual Conference Plenary Session of the Rio Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church

STATEMENT OF FACTS

The questions of law addressed in this decision were posed during the 2021 Annual Conference of the Rio Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church which convened virtually from the Conference Center in San Antonio, Texas, on June 10, 2021, and concluded on June 12, 2021. The questions were posed by the Rev. John Feagins at first informally and then reduced to writing and transmitted to Bishop Schnase during the June 11 plenary session; a copy of the written request is attached to this decision.

In summary, Rev. Feagins questioned whether the Report of the Equitable Compensation Commission containing the conference policy on equitable compensation could be presented to the conference as an *information only* item, or should it have been presented for action by the conference so that it could be debated and amended if that was the will of the body.

Bishop Schnase took the question under advisement and now states his ruling.

RULING AND RATIONALE

Ruling: The Equitable Compensation Commission of the Rio Texas Conference did not violate *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* when it reported its policy for information only to the 2021 Rio Texas Annual Conference, nor was the authority of the Annual Conference undermined by such action.

Analysis: The 2016 Book of Discipline, in ¶1625, states as follows: “The (equitable compensation) commission shall carefully study the needs for additional support within the conference and the sources of income and shall *recommend annually* (our emphasis) to the conference for its action a schedule of minimum base compensation for all full-time pastors or those clergy members of the annual conference appointed less than full-time to a local church, subject to such rules and regulations as the conference may adopt.”

The Pre-Conference Report included two reports from the Equitable Compensation Commission, which attached to this decision: Report III, which set minimum pastoral support (listed as “Minimum Pastoral Support Policies”) as an item “For Conference Action”, and Report VI, which restated other policies set in previous years “For Information Only”. Thus, the Disciplinary mandate to recommend annually a schedule of minimum base compensation was met by Report III. Because it required a vote of the conference, the opportunity for a healthy

discussion of Rio Texas needs in a missional context was presented by Report III. Nevertheless, the point is well-taken that given the history of this missional area since the conference was created in 1859, every effort must be made to open up the subjects named in the request from Rev. Feagins so that conference members can consider those needs dispassionately. The Equitable Compensation Commission is directed to consider the matter of an action item on its other policies for the next Annual Conference at its next meeting.

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Rio Texas Interested Persons/Parties To Whom Copies Should Be Sent

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