

# Fall 2023 Board Report

## From the General Secretary



**Spurred to  
Love and Good Deeds  
in Such a Time as This**

## “Spurred to Love and Good Deeds: Part II”

### **Global Ministries General Secretary's Report**

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

October 20, 2023

**By Roland Fernandes, General Secretary**

Grace and peace be with you!

### **Scripture**

I will set my remarks in the context of Scripture from the Book of Hebrews, as I did at our Maputo meeting earlier this year.

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another....*

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV)

While this passage helped anchor the series of events we held in Maputo in April, it also fits with our experiences as an agency over this whole year. In the midst of much negativity in the church and, for that matter, the world, we have sought to hold unswervingly to hope, to trust in God’s faithfulness, to focus on love and good deeds, and to meet together with partners throughout the year. The good deeds include reimagining how we do our work, how we think proactively about those we are called to serve, and how we serve the church, for whom we are called into existence as an agency.

It is again good to be with you as a board of directors in a setting outside of the United States. Yesterday, I shared with you about mission and missionary work here in Asia, and you will learn more about it over the next couple of days as well. We meet in a country that was ravaged by the Khmer Rouge regime decades ago, who were responsible for the mass genocide of over 3 million of their own citizens. The images you have seen and will see are a reminder of the impact of hateful ideologies; and those again blanket us across the globe. Not to be lost is the support that the Khmer Rouge received from the U.S. and other Western nations. Sadly, here in Cambodia, the same regime has governed for over 37 years, and all opposition has been systematically disempowered. We do not easily learn our lessons as a human race.

It is also good to meet with you for the second time this year in person, because that was not something that had happened for the previous three years because of the pandemic. It is also a historic year as far as board of directors' meetings are concerned because, as you know by now, these are the first and second times that the Board of Global Ministries has met outside of the United States. While this is not likely to happen again for some time, I hope these two meetings provided meaningful context for our directors and an important connection to our regional missionaries and partners. The uniqueness of this time is also highlighted by several new board directors. At our spring board meeting in Maputo, we had three new directors join us – Corey Perry, Margaret Johnson and Patricia Longstroth. We now have four more new directors in this meeting – Bishop Israel Painit, Abel Vega, Scott Brewer and Yvette Richards. We have seven new directors in the midst of a quadrennium, which is rare, because of vacancies created by disaffiliations, resignations and episcopal elections. At the same time, some of you will be completing 12 years on this board. I welcome you all and look forward to your contributions for the rest of this prolonged quadrennium.

Before I move further, I want to lift up the memory of people that we have lost in these last months, people who had close connections with our agency. The first is the Rev. Edgar Avitia Legarda, who passed away suddenly on June 27<sup>th</sup>. Edgar, as you know, was the lead of our Global Mission Relationships unit as well as our staff person responsible for relationships with the Latin America and Caribbean region, which he was connected with for several decades. Edgar has left behind a void that is not easy to fill, and I will speak to this a bit later. His loss was sudden and impacted all of us, especially those who had known him for a long time. We hope to honor his memory at the board meeting next April in Atlanta. Second, I would lift up Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar, who was the chair of the Asian American Language Ministry Plan and closely associated with Global Ministries for many years. For those of you who knew him, he had a great passion for mission and cared deeply for the work of this agency. He will be sorely missed. And third, I want to lift up Donald Kirby, who was a director on our independent audit committee for about 10 years and prior to that, a director on United Methodist Development Fund for eight years. Don passed away on July 10 after a brief illness. Of course, we have lost many others in this time as well, but I want to lift up these three persons who have played significant roles for Global Ministries.

## Strategic direction

Over the past three years, we have been speaking about how The United Methodist Church and Global Ministries, as a part of it, has entered “a new mission age.” This new age has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, recognition of systemic racism, the increasingly apparent realities of climate change and anxieties about the future of the denomination. We have called this season “such a time as this,” borrowing a phrase from the Book of Esther that describes a period of challenge and poignancy.

I want to remind us all, and for our new directors in particular, of the journey we have traveled since I took this role as general secretary on September 1, 2020. We took on the task of evaluating our

past work and our future possibilities with the help of much prayer, Bible study and the guidance of five operational touchstones: 1. Sharpened focus for all programs, including program consolidations and realignments; 2. Increased accountability among staff to deliver on achievable goals; 3. Expanded collaboration within and beyond the agency; 4. Strengthened tools for and commitment to gauging and reporting impact at all levels; and 5. Enhanced communication.

Within this context, a great deal of time and thought was spent by staff to project short- and long-term strategic plans and evaluate program priorities. I again share the chart of our identified 17 programs within our four missional priorities, which are:

- Missionaries
- Evangelism and church revitalization
- Global health
- Humanitarian relief and recovery

It is still important for us to continue to look at these programs critically as the significant budget reductions projected for this agency in the next quadrennium will require re-thinking and re-imagining how we do our programmatic work. My hope is that over this next year, we can continue to discern their pathways going forward.

## Strategic conversations

I have repeatedly said that we are in a liminal time, a time when transformation can happen. We cannot go back to how things were prior to 2020. To enable this transition, we have engaged in several conversations. I shared this slide before on the various strategic conversations we have been having.

First, the staff conversations around close *alignment of our work* regionally and sectorally continues. As I have said before, regionally is how we have historically done mission work (GBGM), and sectorally is how we have done humanitarian work (UMCOR, Global Health). We are now piloting a team

focused on our work in the Africa Central Conference involving both the regional and the sectoral staff. As we define this model, we will continue it in other regions of work moving forward.

Part of the strategy in engaging the church are the intentional conversations I have been having with church leaders around the world over the past two plus years. Individual conversations with bishops in Latin America and the Caribbean are continuing after conversations with bishops in Africa prior to that.

We also planned three significant events in 2023 to engage with our partners.

As you know, the first of these three major events this year was the *Africa Mission Partners Consultation* in Maputo, Mozambique, the purpose of which was intense listening to the mission goals and visions of United Methodist leaders in Africa. Representatives, including bishops, came from conferences representing 17 countries and even more ethnic communities. Our partners were particularly interested in developing new and stronger partnerships that recognize and utilize African assets, build capacity and develop leadership within African conferences. A keen desire was expressed to move the church in Africa toward greater self-sustenance based on mutual respect and accountability. A great amount of information was collected and must be applied in ways keeping with the African visions shared in Maputo. We will have further conversation around this later this morning.

On August 2-3, we had significant conversations that convened at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta around the *Guiding Principles of Missionary Service*. Eleven years ago, we met at the Drew Theological Seminary in New Jersey to enunciate such principles. It was time to revisit them deeply and critically in a rapidly changing church and world. Earlier last year, in response to a request I made, I was able to be in small group conversations with 80 missionaries from various regions around the world prior to the consultation. The missionaries were invited to provide feedback on a variety of questions

and this input was taken into consideration while framing the conversation on Guiding Principles for Missionary Service.

At the August meeting, missionaries, staff members, board members and partners joined together to listen to one another and to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The presence of ecumenical partners added an important element to our reflection. At the end of the event, missionaries shared that they had felt heard, and we gathered a great deal of input that we will be processing over the months to come. You will hear some initial feedback from the gathering later this morning.

While talking about missionaries, one of the increasing challenges around missionary work is the inability to obtain visas in different places around the world. This challenge is no longer isolated but is becoming widespread around the world. This for me brings into question how real our goal, our mantra of “from everywhere to everywhere” really is. While this has been a wonderful phrase and has been successful, the current world context brings up the question of how we can say this with integrity.

We will hold our third major listening event of the year next month: *a consultation for partners from annual conferences in the United States* on November 28-29 in Atlanta, which will bring together Global Ministries directors and staff and annual conference leadership. We have invited up to five people from each annual conference, and our registration numbers will be around 250, which is very encouraging. I hope this will again be a place where we can continue to listen, learn and engage in how we can better help connect the church in mission, which is a primary reason Global Ministries exists.

With regard to strategic conversations, I will mention two events that were held in Seoul, Korea, at the end of August. The first was a roundtable for *Peace on the Korean Peninsula* with the Korean Methodist Church, United Methodist Church, and the World Methodist Council. This was the fourth such consultation. The Peace Roundtable garnered a lot of press and attention locally, and our dream and hope continue to be for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula and for peace in that region.

This was followed by a two-day *mission consultation* between the Global Mission Board of the Korean Methodist Church and GBGM, which was a follow up to the meeting held in Atlanta in August 2022. There was progress from the previous meeting, and we agreed to create a working group of six people, three from each entity, which will explore increased cooperation in three areas:

1. Mission work in Vietnam and Mongolia, especially leadership development and training.
2. Engaging young adults in missionary service.
3. Promoting peace on the Korean peninsula and other areas of the world.

In addition, the group was asked to explore the possibility of collaboration in developing a museum of Methodist missionary history in Korea.

The Korean Methodist Church is a significant entity in world Methodism, and it is important for us to continue to engage with it in meaningful ways missionally.

## Program matters

I would now like to cover a few program matters.

*Latin America and the Caribbean:* I want to cover briefly our strategy in Latin America and Caribbean, especially with the passing of Edgar. Over the past few years, our strategy in this region has shifted rapidly, and to be honest, was not necessarily always very clear. With Edgar's passing, I have been working with a small team of eight persons, which includes staff, former staff and missionaries from the region, to oversee our work in the region and determine a longer-term strategy moving forward. As I shared earlier, I have been meeting over the past several months with the heads of churches and bishops of the various partners in Latin America and the Caribbean to hear their perspectives on mission and how we work together moving forward. Staffing decisions will be made in the coming months. I have also talked about having a roundtable with our partners in Latin America and the Caribbean sometime



next fall, after General Conference, so that we can discern together what mission means in this important region of the world. Take Cuba, for example. The Methodist Church in Cuba's General Conference has informed The United Methodist Church that it is no longer to be considered an affiliated autonomous partner of the UMC. Earlier this year, Global Ministries was also informed that the Methodist Church in Cuba did not want to participate in the Advance program, nor was it interested in Endowment income. They are, however, still interested in a relationship. We are pursuing conversations with the leadership of the church in Cuba to see how best we can move forward together.

*Africa:* I want to double back to Africa. While we will talk more about the follow-up from Maputo a bit later, as the UMC appears to be moving into a more regionalized structure, I believe it is important for Global Ministries to revive its regional office plan for Africa, approved by this board in 2016. Many of you were directors when we talked about opening regional offices around the world. We did open an office in Latin America and the Caribbean in Argentina along with Upper Room, which had to be closed a couple of years later. We opened the office here in Asia, and it continues to function with locations in Seoul and Manila. I think it would be important for us to focus on actual presence on the African continent as The United Methodist Church becomes a lot more regionally focused. I will discuss this further with the executive committee and will be open to have other agencies be a part of this.

*Exhibition:* An exhibition of contemporary Native American artistic works, which Global Ministries is sponsoring in collaboration with the church's Native American Comprehensive Plan, will officially open in November at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport in the T North Concourse and run from November 6, 2023, to November 4, 2024.

The exhibition is titled "This Land Calls Us Home: Indigenous Relationships with Southeastern Homelands" and will feature the work of 26 contemporary Native American artists and designers. The exhibition includes more than 60 works of art that express the visions and voices and authentic

perspectives of their Southeastern Indigenous heritage. It invites viewers to identify with their stories, notably their challenge to remain connected to their roots and feel at home in a mainstream society that often alienates them.

## Operational changes

a. *Regional Program Missionaries:* Another way regionalization is playing out in our work is having regional program missionaries, which as the description says, are missionaries based in a region working on particular programs of Global Ministries and UMCOR. We now have two regional migration missionaries, in Europe and Latin American and the Caribbean, and two regional agriculture missionaries working with the Yambasu Agriculture Initiative in Africa.

b. *Disaster Response:* We have combined the U.S. Disaster Response work and the International Disaster Response work under one Director for Disaster Response. While the two programs will continue to operate in the distinct areas that they do, this move will help bring about more consistency in how we respond to disasters globally.

c. *Granting:* One of the steps we are taking as we adapt to the changing realities around us is with granting. We are a granting agency even if we do not say it, given the number of grants we make each year. We are looking very closely at the multiplicity of granting procedures that we have within the organization and have been making significant shifts to reduce these. A key part of the re-imagining of our granting process is centralizing our granting processes and activities across the organization in a grants unit, which is currently being staffed.

d. *Peace and Justice:* With the creation of the Peace and Justice program that I mentioned at our last board meeting, I am hoping we can engage even more as an agency with the various bodies working for peace on the Korean Peninsula as well as other areas of the world, including Palestine and Israel. The World Council of Churches is also interested in partnering with us in this work.

e. *Mission Engagement*: This might sound repetitive, but I have been emphasizing how important engagement and relationship is as we work in God's mission. The recently revived Mission Engagement unit is functioning and will continue to evolve to enable it to effectively enhance our work of connecting the church globally.

## Budget

I now want to talk about our 2024 budget, which will be presented through the executive committee. We are bringing for your approval a budget of \$49 million for GBGM and \$38 million for UMCOR, which have \$1 million and \$7 million reductions respectively for GBGM and UMCOR when compared with 2023. Looking at the projected 45.2% reduction for GBGM apportionments for the 2025-2028 quadrennium, significant steps will need to be taken to address this for the future. As you know, we have been taking steps for the past few years to address this. We reduced 65 staff positions between 2018 and 2020. We have continued to streamline our programs and make programmatic and procedural changes that I have mentioned in this and earlier reports. Our strategy will have to include increased fund development, around which we are doing a detailed assessment at this time. We will also be looking at programs and, of course, interagency alignment, which will be very critical. We realize that The United Methodist Church will be different and as you all know, we have been proactive in trying to move ahead in discerning and making changes that are needed.

## Board of directors

At the last two board meetings, you, as directors, have been involved in strategic conversations. At this board meeting, we will have one more session of strategic conversations. First, in your small groups, you will consider a proposal for an Advisory Council or Consulting Members for the board, which is based on suggestions from the previous meeting. In addition, we have sent out four questions for conversation based on our past discussions, which relate to the composition, competencies and

orientation of the board of directors for the future. We look forward to your feedback to these questions, which will be critical to the onboarding of new directors later next year.

I think as we look at the future of our board meetings, the ability for us to meet twice a year in person will need to be re-examined. Of course, I'm not talking about next year, but beyond that. Many agencies are looking at one online meeting and one in-person board meeting in the future, and I think that may be where we need to go. We have realized that being on Zoom and other web-based communication platforms is a gift and has tremendous advantages, yet we also realize that it is not the same as being able to meet in person. So, we need to balance the realities of what we do in this critical area of governance.

## Interagency alignment

Finally, I want to talk briefly about interagency alignment work. First, I will say there's been great commitment on our part, as you have heard many times, to work with other agencies to see what we can do together, programmatically and operationally, in a future that will look very different. In that respect, we have worked very closely with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), with which we have created six teams looking at six different areas – scholarships; grants; leadership formation and training; mission theology; board alignments; and regional work. In addition, we have been looking at shared services in the areas of IT, including Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software for finance, and other areas as well. The work on the CRM includes United Methodist Communications (UMCOM) and GBHEM. You are also aware that we have been involved in strategic work with UMCOM over the past two plus years. Aligning our work together as agencies is not easy and at times has been challenging, but progress is being made. In view of the significantly diminished funding, it is very clear that there is no other way forward than for general church agencies to continue to align and work together. We will share more with you in this meeting around these matters.

These past three years have been a time of discernment, movement and preparing for changes we do not fully know yet. Of course, it has not been easy for us as staff and, I'm sure, for you as directors. But despite the difficulties, we “continue to spur one another on and encourage one another,” as the passage from Hebrews that we started with said. We do believe that in this movement, in the shifting, in this uncertainty and at times this darkness, God is working to make things new. We do trust that if we allow God’s spirit to work, we will be able to discern the right changes for this time because ultimately, this is God's mission. The challenge for us is to get out of the way, which of course, as we all know, is a very big one. I am grateful to you, our directors, for your commitment, for your support and for your trust. We look forward to continuing this journey together in the spirit of Hebrews 10:23-25:

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another....*