

# Spring 2022 Board Report

From the General Secretary and Staff

# Accepting and Reflecting God's Grace

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General secretary and staff report to directors of the General Board of Global Ministries

Roland Fernandes, General Secretary

May 11, 2022

## Introduction

As I have been reflecting on God's grace, so necessary in these times, I am reminded that the first generation of the followers of Jesus lived with pressing uncertainties. Initially concentrated in Judea, the movement's geographical spread raised questions about its relation to Jewish law and custom as well as to the Greco-Roman culture it encountered. What ethical rules applied in what was emerging as an ethnically mixed church? How was leadership determined? And the Jesus-centered groups scattered along the eastern Mediterranean coast and pushing into Europe had no common name. What should this movement even be called?

The force of uncertainties about polity and practice in the early Jesus communities was more than counterbalanced by a reliance on the grace of God, that is, the love and unwarranted favor of God in Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament letters comprise a library of grace. These writings refer constantly to the grace of God. Grace empowers the sermons of Peter and the charity of Stephen in Acts; it accredits the travels of Paul and Barnabas. Greetings and prayers surround individuals and communities with God's gracious presence; "the grace of God be with you" is repeated again and again. God's grace is source and sustainer of the gospel in the New Testament, the fountain of faith, the preserver of the church, the provider of community, the substance of life and hope.

The gospel was grace in the early church, and grace, God's love, was a gift to be shared. This is dramatically seen in the 11th chapter of Acts when Barnabas is sent by the church in Jerusalem to check out a report that some strangers in Antioch had heard and believed in the good news of Jesus. He was unsure of what to expect but found the report to be true, so true, that he "saw" the grace of God in the lives of those strangers and their faith community. The strangers had accepted and then reflected God's grace. Is it any wonder that followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" in Antioch?

Grace was the central teaching that John Wesley and the early Methodists accepted and reflected,

giving them spiritual strength and perseverance. An awareness of the power and presence of God's grace—free, unwarranted grace—is at the heart of Wesleyan theology. For Wesley, God's grace through the Holy Spirit precedes, welcomes, schools and completes the life of faith and the experience of faith's work in the community of witness, the church.

Our generation of Methodists, like the first generation of Jesus' followers, is living with pressing uncertainties—uncertainties arising from our time and place. We have been considering four self-evident uncertainties in our board meetings across the last two years; uncertainties about health on a global level (the COVID pandemic), concerns about the future of The United Methodist Church, racism and its consequences, and threats arising from climate change.

Amid these uncertainties, we must constantly remind ourselves what powerful assurance grace provides. Listen to the description of grace by retired Bishop Kenneth L. Carder: "Grace is God's presence to create, heal, forgive, reconcile and transform human hearts, communities and the entire creation. Wherever God is present, there is grace! Grace brought creation into existence. Grace birthed human beings, bestowed on us the divine image, redeemed us in Jesus Christ and is ever transforming the whole creation into the realm of God's reign of compassion, justice, generosity and peace." ("A Wesleyan understanding of grace," UMC Resources)

Will our capacity to deal with such uncertainties be more than counterbalanced by reliance on the grace of God, that is, on the love and unwarranted favor of God in Jesus Christ? We have no alternative but reliance on grace as we encounter contemporary uncertainties.

We continue at this meeting with the challenge of considering how best to organize our work as people beloved by God, remembering at all times that this is *missio Dei*, God's mission, and not any one of ours.

The remainder of my abbreviated report to you today broadly covers two areas:

1. Vision and strategies for our long-term future;
2. Current programs and related matters.

## Vision and strategies for our long-term future

This meeting will diverge from our usual pattern. Our two days (instead of the normal three) on Zoom will focus primarily on the vision and direction for the long-term future of this agency, a path we began traveling on the past almost two years as we seek to do what God is calling us to, in this time.

The first step we took over these past months was focusing on our four program priorities—missionaries, evangelism and church revitalization, global health, and humanitarian relief and recovery—and the identification of 17 programs under these priorities. With focused and intentional work for each of the 17 programs, we produced a program template which gave information on each program in a consistent manner. Most of them had logical frameworks which were developed by our Monitoring and Evaluation unit. You were provided access to all these documents a couple of months back. It can be provided again if necessary.

This has led us to now produce a draft short-term strategic plan for the present period (two to three years), which the executive committee will discuss during this meeting. We are not necessarily changing **“what”** we are doing presently but rather focusing on the programs and priorities of greatest impact. As a next step, we will examine **“how”** we may do our work more effectively and efficiently.

One issue staff has already started to consider is how to create better alignment between our regional mission work and our primarily humanitarian sectoral approach involving UMCOR and the Global Health unit. These two, mission and service, are often— not always—involved in the same geographical regions and same denominational structure. Is it possible to fashion a strategy that covers both mission and service when they occur in the same region?

A key area of our work relates to missionaries. How do we adapt to mission in these changing times? This is a critical conversation that will involve engaging missionaries, among others. Can missionary recruitment be driven by a regional strategy? Should missionary placements be considered by all units of the agency, including Global Health and UMCOR?

Another important area is grant-making. I am convinced that we need to escalate the movement toward a more centralized granting process. This can still recognize the uniqueness of the various grant sources without affecting the size of allocations. Centralized granting will offer smoother operations for our partners and

ourselves and should expedite board grant involvement. As we seek to find ways to improve our grant-making, we recently surveyed nine other nonprofits on the matter of grant review and approval and learned our GBGM/UMCOR directors are far more involved in the process than those entities. Another key question that emerges is “can our granting be driven by a regional strategy?”

Some of these questions may be controversial but considering them will help us think about program alignment and effectiveness. I am committed to bring as many voices to the table as effectively possible as we look toward the future of this agency. Your input to this process will be meaningful. I have had conversations with staff groups around many of these questions. Not unconnected, I want to share that my conversations with the central conference bishops, beginning with Africa, have been very engaging and hopeful as we seek to be mutual partners in mission in these changing times. We considered topics such as health, agriculture, missionaries and Nationals in Mission. As an agency, we must continue to listen.

You will spend time today in small group discussions considering questions related to the future of the agency; questions which have emerged from several sets of conversations, both internal and external. Today's discussions will be facilitated by executive committee members who have been in conversations with staff on this process. The questions before us touch on vision, program, practice, governance, relationships, funding – all informing the strategies we identify for engagement in God's mission.

My hope is that in this and upcoming board meetings we can engage in strategic conversations about how we should adapt to the rapidly changing environment in the world and the church. I consider it essential that such conversations take place among you—the present slate of directors—who have so much experience with the agency. Conversations about increased collaboration and alignment continue with the general secretaries of the program agencies of the church, which I hope will lead to some productive results.

## Current programs and related matters

Although this meeting is focused on strategy, I will take a little time to talk about just a few programs and other matters that I would lift up for your attention.

- A. **Ukraine:** The most dramatic matter is our response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24 of this year. I hope you are keeping up on the website with our response.

- Our work with annual conferences and churches in the European central conferences has been building on local efforts to ensure relief gets where and when it is needed. Although the UMC churches in the region are very small, they have carried a heavy load with generosity and a remarkable spirit of care.
- Seven districts/annual conferences of the UMC in Europe have received UMCOR grants to support their work with displaced persons inside Ukraine and those who have fled the country. Because of its supervision of most of the UMC entities in countries adjacent to Ukraine, the Central and Southern Europe Central Conference has been providing direct coordination of relief efforts in the region. They have hired (refugee) coordinators in many of these districts and annual conferences, providing guidance and supervision to their work and sharing weekly reports about the successes and challenges of each of these entities as they support refugees.
- As we look at funding of non-UMC entities engaged in relief, the Act Alliance is a network of Christian humanitarian organizations with which UMCOR is currently deeply engaged. Our contributions to the ACT Ukraine appeal total \$1 million and will provide humanitarian relief in Ukraine, Romania, Hungary and Poland.

Another ecumenical body with which UMCOR has a strong historical relationship is Church World Service (CWS). UMCOR has provided two grants totaling \$700,000 to CWS that will provide case management to Ukrainian asylum seekers in the U.S. and refugee case management operations in Moldova.

Our long-standing partner, the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), is providing a vital link for our humanitarian work, especially in Romania and inside Ukraine. Grants to IOCC totaling \$1 million are under consideration, to support internally displaced persons in Ukraine as well as refugees in Romania.

We are also working with several local and regional NGOs – International Blue Crescent, International Association of Refugees, Human Rights League in Slovakia, among others.

The Arlene Campbell Humanitarian Foundation is a Texas-based humanitarian organization

focused on Ukraine with whom we have worked to transport three shipments of medical supplies and equipment worth \$935,000 donated by Ohio Health, a not-for-profit charitable health care outreach of The United Methodist Church. UMCOR made the connection between Ohio Health and the foundation.

- This is a snapshot of the work we are doing on behalf of those who have been displaced by the war in Ukraine. We will provide a copy of this powerpoint and report to you. Individuals, families, Sunday school classes, local churches and others have generously supported UMCOR's efforts to alleviate suffering and advance hope and healing in response to the war. From choir concerts to pound cake sales, to t-shirts made in support of Ukraine, individuals have been creative and generous in their fundraising efforts. Over \$10 million in gifts have been donated to UMCOR's International Disaster Response Advance. Over 9,000 of these gifts have come from first-time donors to UMCOR. Additional funds have been received for several of the In Mission Together Advances in Eurasia, most especially for Ukraine-Moldova, which has received \$300,000. We are deeply grateful for the tremendous outpouring of support from our members, churches and donors. We are striving to update this dashboard regularly, so you can get the full picture in a one place.
- B. **COVID-19:** We continue to provide support for the COVID-19 pandemic that is still affecting people around the world. A recent study released by the World Health Organization has stated that 15 million people have died from the pandemic through the end of 2021. Global Ministries continues to provide grants to church partners around the world. So far, we have awarded more than 341 grants worth \$4.6 million to 59 countries. These grants are targeted to help about 2.4 million people with food relief, health supplies, training and awareness-raising.
- C. **Regional missionary recruitment:** Despite the health implications and travel limitations of the pandemic, we continue to equip and assign new mission personnel. Training was adapted to a virtual platform and global missionaries and Global Mission Fellows were prepared to begin their mission service as soon as travel was possible. As the pandemic restrictions have been lifted and reduced in many places around the world, Global Ministries is hosting, along with partners, four commissioning events outside the U.S. as well as several in this country. From April through July of this year, nine services of commissioning have taken place or are scheduled involving 54 persons

in mission. We appreciate the resilience of these persons as they respond to God's call and are also grateful for the partnerships with annual conferences and partners in enabling this.

D. **Allocations of funds:** As we look at our financial situation, I am proposing four funding allocations to these critical causes:

- ***\$3.5 million to the Yambasu Agricultural Initiative in Africa.*** This program is developing well in many annual conferences in Africa. Most episcopal areas have availed of these grants to promote the sustainability of The United Methodist Church in Africa through agriculture and the optimal use of church-owned land. To date, 13 grants have been awarded in 12 annual conferences, with grants averaging \$230,000. The new funds will enable new grants, build capacity through training, allow field visits and monitoring, and improve management efficiency.
- ***\$2.5 million for global health programming.*** This programming will primarily support community health partnerships through annual conference and episcopal area health boards and networks of church-related health facilities. The funding will enhance our work in this area, prioritizing infrastructure improvement, training and service delivery.
- ***\$2 million for Africa Central Conferences Sustainability Fund.*** This fund addresses two challenges: the development of infrastructure to sustain the church as it grows in many areas of the continent and building a financial plan to create or enhance institutional capacity.
- ***\$1 million for international gathering of missionaries, Nationals in Mission and partners.*** Such gatherings offer streams of mission lifeblood by investing in the human capital that we as an agency rely on in mission. These events have not been possible in the recent past, and hopefully we can return to a series of such events.

The Nationals in Mission program is an important means for drawing on the gifts for mission that God has given to Christians around the world. I will propose a significant increase for the 2023 budget for the Nationals in Mission program, doubling the 2022 budgeted amount. Historically, this number used to be much higher but had to be reduced because of budget restrictions.



E. **Scholarships:** The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry is now providing administrative support for our scholarship programs. We are not transferring our scholarship program to them but are engaging in interagency collaboration for the sake of efficiency and expediency. Our historic programs, such as World Communion (formerly Crusade) Scholarships, and the Kendall grants in the field of health, continue. Decisions on recipients remain with Global Ministries' staff and directors.

F. **Environmental sustainability:** Global Ministries continues to provide staff leadership for the interagency commitment to just and equitable net-zero emissions and is developing emission tracking and reduction practices. Informed by guidance drafted by the interagency staff group, Global Ministries is developing emission reduction criteria for staff travel and meeting planning.

In mid-April, a first-year report of the effort underscored the enormous importance and the complexity of the issue.

G. **Building occupancy and tenancies:** As of May 1, the building in Atlanta is open to staff of up to 30 individuals at a time and in keeping with our long-term remote work policy. We will continue to increase these numbers as COVID conditions improve. Meanwhile, HOPE Atlanta is settling in on two floors of the North Building and the mission board of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in an office on the third floor of the South Building.

On May 22, Grace UMC will culminate its 151 years of ministry in a service of thanksgiving, celebration, remembrance and decommissioning. The Grace name will not be carried forward and the new congregation will be called Cascade Midtown after this is approved by the North Georgia Annual Conference, and Global Ministries looks forward to the same collaborative relationship with it that we have enjoyed with Grace.

H. **Staff matters:** Susan Clark joined us last month as chief communications officer of Global Ministries and UMCOR. You have all seen the announcement and I look forward to working with her in setting the tone and content of our public message, in keeping with our mandate.

I. **Bishop Ortiz:** I want to take this opportunity to thank Bishop Hector Ortiz for his six years of faithful service as a director of Global Ministries. This is his last board meeting, as he retires as the leader of the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico. The Rev. Lisette Gabriel is the newly elected bishop in Puerto

Rico. Thank you, Bishop Ortiz, for your constancy, your energy, your wisdom, your love of the church and your commitment to God's mission. Grace be with you in the days and years ahead.

## Conclusion

We are all aware that the 2020 General Conference has been postponed until 2024. With all the uncertainties that continue to rage and the new complexities and challenges that keep emerging, we need to remain focused on our mission mandate, which does not change, but must of course adapt to evolving realities. I am very grateful for the work of all our staff and for the direction and support of you, our directors, in these very different times. Our fall 2022 board meeting will most likely be online for the very reasons General Conference had to be postponed. But we will try to hold at least one of our board meetings next year in person at a setting outside of the United States.

God's grace be with and upon us as we continue our work through this board meeting and beyond. In closing, I offer you these words from Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16 NKJV)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roland Fernandes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Roland Fernandes  
General Secretary  
General Board of Global Ministries and UMCOR