
BOARD MEETING SPRING 2024

Board Report

From the General Secretary



Atlanta, GA

Connecting the
Church in Mission

GREATER MUTUALITY AND COLLABORATION

Global Ministries General Secretary's Report

Spring Board Meeting 2024

March 7, 2024 | Atlanta, Georgia

By Roland Fernandes, General Secretary

Good morning to Global Ministries directors and staff, to GBHEM directors and staff, and to other guests who are with us here today and online. Grace and peace be with all of you.

I want to begin by acknowledging that not only is this the first ever joint board meeting between Global Ministries and GBHEM, it is also the last board meeting of this quadrennium. That means that for many of you, your service on our board is coming to an end. It has been an especially long and at times arduous quadrennium – lasting eight years and including many changes and disruptions, and I want to thank all our directors for their service over the course of the last eight years and to those who are completing 12 years, having served two quadrennia. I hope that many of you will come back next quadrennium on one of our boards.

I also want to acknowledge the significance of this joint meeting of our two boards – something that is very new and evolving and yet has significant potential for new ways of effective mission and ministry. I am grateful for the vision of both our boards that have supported this new direction.

Throughout my time as general secretary, which has been filled with many challenges, I have suggested to our staff, missionaries and board that we have all been called “for such a time as this,” echoing the words of Queen Esther’s uncle Mordecai to her.

The pandemic is just one of several realities from the past few years that I have been talking about in my general secretary's reports. Other of those realities have included resurgent racism, the ravages of climate change, turmoil within the UMC, and a dramatically increased need to collaborate and partner. This present joint board meeting reflects that last point.

Of course, as we meet, we are mindful of those places around the world that are experiencing a time of war and destruction, including Ukraine, Palestine, the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and many others. We lift them up in our prayers and recommit ourselves to helping bring about a time for peace, which is part of the goal of the relatively new Peace and Justice Ministries program at Global Ministries.

Our hearts are broken by the suffering that has occurred in Israel and Palestine since October. As we look closely at what is happening in Gaza, in particular, the term genocide should be a descriptor we are using. Church responses, especially the UMC, have been very weak and timid. We encourage all those in positions of authority to establish an immediate ceasefire so that those who are starving can be fed. As a Christian humanitarian organization, we ask that humanitarian organizations have full, immediate and safe access to Gaza.

Before I move ahead, I want to remember our former legal counsel, Paul Bankes, who passed away recently. Paul and his company served Global Ministries for over four decades, and I had in fact asked him to attend this board meeting, so we could appropriately recognize him for his long and dedicated service, but he declined, saying it was a privilege for him to have served the church and he did not want the spotlight. While Paul's role was legal counsel, for those of us who worked with him closely, we

knew his passion and commitment went well beyond the legal realm. His sudden demise after just retiring was a shock to us all.

A new governance model

My reports generally include reflections on our progress in the 17 programs and four priority areas of our work. But since you heard about those yesterday, this report will take a different approach. I will talk about some significant recent meetings and events related to the agency as we have been seeking a more collaborative way of working. Before getting into this, perhaps another biblical passage is relevant here:

(1 Samuel 8:1-9 CEB) Now when Samuel got old, he appointed his sons to serve as Israel's judges. ² The name of his oldest son was Joel; the name of the second was Abijah. They served as judges in Beer-sheba. ³ But Samuel's sons didn't follow in his footsteps. They tried to turn a profit, they accepted bribes, and they perverted justice.

⁴ So all the Israelite elders got together and went to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "Listen. You are old now, and your sons don't follow in your footsteps. So appoint us a king to judge us like all the other nations have." ⁶ It seemed very bad to Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us," so he prayed to the LORD.

⁷ The LORD answered Samuel, "Comply with the people's request – everything they ask of you – because they haven't rejected you. No, they've rejected me as king over them. ⁸ They are doing to you only what they've been doing to me^[a] from the day I brought them out of Egypt to this very minute, abandoning me and worshipping other gods. ⁹ So comply with their request, but give them a clear warning, telling them how the king will rule over them."^[b]

Old governance models in Israel were no longer working at the time of this story. First Eli's sons and then Samuel's sons exploited the people for their own gain rather than rendering just and faithful service. So, the elders of Israel proposed a new model of governance: a king. Israel's problems would be solved, they suggested, if there could be more centralization in the governance structure. God suggested to Samuel in this story that this is not the right approach, and the subsequent history of Israel and Judah, with more bad kings than good kings, shows the flaws in this approach of centralization.

Yet we can identify with the elders of Israel here. Centralization has often been a practice and an attitude among United Methodists. For most of the church's history, there has been centralization based on geographic grounds as United Methodists in the United States have presumed themselves to be the center of the denomination, a presumption that has been infused into the structure and governance of the denomination. And while no one will readily admit to it, the reality is that we most often continue to function today in that manner across the church. Our general agencies have often presumed to be the center of whatever activity we were tasked to support, whether that was mission, education or something else. We have presumed that we knew best in telling churches and annual conferences how they should carry out the work of the church. We had portrayed ourselves as a global church, but in reality, we function as a U.S.-centric church with some global outreach.

Yet, like the elders of Israel, we have come to a point where, for a variety of reasons, our old models of governance are not working. They are not working for an increasingly worldwide church. They are not working in societies where denominational

loyalties and support for institutions of all types are in decline. They are not working in a post-pandemic, post-disaffiliation context.

But rather than insisting on more centralization, we are trying something else, something different: more mutuality and more collaboration. We seem to be always grappling with questions about how to get people to work together effectively toward a common end. An alternative to centralization is a grassroots approach focused on greater communication and collaboration among people. Communication allows people to adjust themselves to one another, a little bit at a time, and a spirit of collaboration ensures that they remain committed to this process. But not just that. The spirit of collaboration allows for joint ownership. As many of you know, although this approach requires more effort to communicate well, it is a stronger, more resilient approach, especially in times of crises.

So, United Methodists are trying this new approach to governance. We are shifting from agencies dictating to churches and annual conferences to agencies listening, inviting and collaborating with churches and annual conferences. We are showing more of that attitude of communication, collaboration and alignment toward one another as well.

The church is also shifting from U.S.-centrism to regionalization. Rather than the U.S. dictating to the rest of the world how to be United Methodist, we are entering into processes of ongoing intercultural communication and mutual adjustment in our practice of what it means to be United Methodist. We talk about collaboration, alignment and wanting to hear all voices. Do we always want all voices at the table? At Global Ministries, we have used the words “mutuality in mission” for many years, but I wonder

how widespread of a reality that truly was. We need a different mindset starting at the level of the individual to change to a truly post-colonial, mutual way of working, especially when we have the privileged access to resources that most often aligns with power. As you know, the many conversations we have had in recent months with partners around the world are all geared to this very purpose of increasing mutuality in mission.

We don't know how this new approach will turn out. When they made the request for a king, the Israelite elders didn't know how that would turn out either. Of course, God warned Samuel about the consequences, but the elders didn't know. Ultimately, both a lot of bad and some good came from their decision. King David, one of the models of Jewish faith, was a result of the choice to have a king, just as wicked King Ahab was.

Although we can't fully foresee the consequences of our present decisions, and although we expect there will be both some positive and some negative results, we nevertheless step in the direction of intentional collaboration, trusting it is the right one. We will try to not make the same mistake that the Israelite elders made.

Recent events

Global Ministries board members and staff have seen this slide before, which lists a number of significant events that we hosted last year. Not on this slide but also significant was a bilateral consultation with the Korean Methodist Church held last August. For GBHEM board members and staff, as you can see from the slide, last year involved our first-ever board meetings held outside the United States, major consultations with annual conferences and episcopal areas in Africa and the United

States, and significant gatherings of missionaries. I want to again thank those GBHEM staff who attended these events and others I will mention as an expression of the two agencies' commitment to alignment. Most of these events that are on this slide our board has already heard about, so I will not cover them at length.

I do want to cover, however, our U.S. Mission Partners Consultation. This event was held November 28-29, 2023, at Peachtree Road UMC here in Atlanta. This event brought together U.S. annual conference directors of connectional ministries, disaster response coordinators, secretaries of global ministries, and racial ethnic ministries leaders; jurisdictional Volunteers in Mission coordinators and Mission Advocates; the leaders of the racial ethnic plans under Global Ministries; directors and staff of Global Ministries; and representatives from two partner agencies, including GBHEM. Global Ministries invited partners to this event out of a desire to strengthen and renew our partnerships with annual conferences in the United States and, as part of that, to better understand their missional realities and aspirations. Conversations over the course of the two days were structured through a mix of plenary and small-group times and included discussions of annual conference priorities for mission work in the United States and internationally, their thinking about mission and their understanding of partnership.

Among the findings from that event are the themes you see here on the screen. There was a very good atmosphere at the event, and we felt a lot of appreciation of our work and of the event. Although we convened the event primarily to listen to our partners in the United States, those partners also shared that they felt like they learned valuable things about us and our work. The desire to reengage in mission after a

season of disaffiliation in the church was palpable. Most of the findings from this event that you see here are in line with the findings from the other consultations over the past year.

Here you can see the overall findings across the three consultations that we held last year. There were five repeated main themes that we heard, with one of them clarified by two sub-themes. These themes included affirmation of Global Ministries' work, a desire for networking and equipping as strategies for mission partnership, a desire for decolonial approaches to mission as expressed by local agency and multiculturalism, and emphasis on the faith-based nature of our work. It is essential that these findings be incorporated into our ways of working and future strategic planning and Global Ministries' senior staff will be working on ways to make this happen. I am sure we will have more to report on this matter in future meetings. As GBHEM staff were present at most of these gatherings, we also realized how many connections and natural alignments there are in the work of our two agencies, which will be considered as we work on following up from these consultations.

In January, we held another significant consultation with the East Africa Episcopal Area. This consultation was to reestablish relationships after the lifting of the 10-year embargo on funds to East Africa, which the board approved last year. It was unfortunate that it took over 10 years to resolve this matter, and we heard sobering testimonies about the negative impacts of the embargo for the church in East Africa. There are a lot of learnings from this, and there was also a lot of hope and expectation for what is possible for the church there now that the embargo is over. We are going to be very intentional about our work in East Africa to strongly support the church there

and reestablish partnership across the various program areas of Global Ministries. I will be naming a Special Assistant to the General Secretary who will focus exclusively on East Africa. We also have a new missionary treasurer for East Africa who will be working with the bishop and conference treasurers on the ground there.

After regional missionary gatherings in Africa and Asia last year, we hosted a gathering for missionaries from Latin American, the Caribbean and Europe at the beginning of February in Bogotá, Colombia. As with our previous missionary gatherings, this was a great time of fellowship and reconnection between our missionaries. It gave me the opportunity to connect with all our missionaries around the world in a period of 10 months. What was also unique, by tying these events to board meetings, our directors and missionaries were able to engage with each other, something that was inconceivable in the past. The missionaries were grateful for these gatherings and said how much they enjoyed this time. Along with the consultation on the Guiding Principles for Missionary Service, held at Candler School of Theology in August last year, there was a lot of focus on our missionaries and missionary work in these past months and a lot to be followed up on.

One major event that is yet to come is General Conference. We have some time set aside in the schedule tomorrow to talk at greater length about General Conference, including major issues that will be part of the conference, legislation that each agency has proposed, talking points from each agency, and the budget. I will therefore not cover all of that material here.

I do, however, want to talk about the proposed budget now, even though we will also cover it tomorrow. The potential impact of the proposed budget that GCFA is

presenting to General Conference is so significant that it bears repeating. GCFA is recommending a dramatic reduction to apportionments collected and hence a dramatic reduction to the World Service Fund, which is one of the major sources of funding for both our agencies. These cuts would go into effect in January 2025, which is when the new budget cycle begins. The current proposal is to cut Global Ministries' income from the World Service Fund by 52%, and the reduction in our apportionments is in excess of \$60 million, which would be a huge challenge for the agency to sustain. As many of you know and have perhaps read, after going through a rigorous process for the upcoming quadrennial budget and accommodating for significant budget reductions over a year ago, there were last minute changes necessary in order to accommodate the needs of the Episcopal Fund, which had not been accounted for in the initially approved budget by GCFA.

We will be helped in the short-term by strategic decisions we have made over the past five years that have put the agency in a good financial position at the present with strong reserves. These reserves mean that we have a cushion that will allow us some transition time as we adapt to the new budget reality. However, this transition time will be short, and so the pressure is on to take decisive actions in the next 18 months to adjust to these new realities.

One piece of that process of adjustment must be revisiting our approach to fundraising. We have just concluded an extensive fundraising study and will soon begin to work on some of the recommendations from the study, which our executive committee has been looking into and supported.

Responding well to new financial realities will also require careful attention to our strategic planning as an agency. You can see here major insights from our 2022-2024 plan, which helped us to identify our 17 programs in four priority areas. You heard about these programs and priority areas yesterday. We will continue to draw on the insights that we gathered from that plan as we move forward.

We are, however, beginning work on a new strategic plan for 2025-2026. I have asked for a strategic plan for just two years rather than an entire quadrennium because of the many uncertainties in the church right now, especially around budgets and regionalization. It does not make sense to spend time trying to project our work four years into the future when there are too many factors that we cannot foresee and do not control. Instead, I believe it is better to focus on the next two years and how we can respond strategically to changes in the agency, in the church, and in the world. Dr. David Scott will be working with me and staff to help put together this plan for the agency, and I have changed his title to reflect this new area of work. He is now the director of Mission Theology and Strategic Planning.

While the strategic plan for 2025-2026 for Global Ministries is still in development, I anticipate that it will have two major focuses. One is on connecting the church in mission. This has long been a tagline for Global Ministries, but I believe it deserves renewed attention. Going along with what we have heard at our consultations, we intend to lean into partnership, collaboration, networking, leadership development, and training and resourcing as important aspects of our participation in God's mission. This focus calls us to continue to see a central part of our role as facilitating the church's participation in God's mission. We know that mission is not just Global Ministries'

mission; it is God's mission, and God calls all parts of the church to be involved in God's mission. This understanding of our work is reflected in our Theology of Mission statement in several places, including in the quote you see there on the screen:

"Partners in God's mission seek to hear God's voice, to discover the signs of the moving of the Spirit through the world today and to bear witness to God's activity – overarching past, present and future – in every local setting."

The other focus in our new strategic plan will be our work in alleviating human suffering. Like the language of connecting the church in mission, the language of alleviating human suffering has been part of Global Ministries for a long time as one of its four mission goals. I believe, though, we need to renew and reclaim that language. Our work in alleviating human suffering includes our work in global health, the various components under humanitarian relief and recovery – disaster response, migration, environmental sustainability, and agriculture and livelihoods, and our growing focus on peace and justice work. While our work in connecting the church in mission recognizes the gifts that God has given to congregations and annual conferences throughout the world, our work in alleviating human suffering includes work that Global Ministries is uniquely positioned to carry out on behalf of the church. Again, this emphasis is not just about priorities but reflects the theological grounding of our work. As I speak about this focus, let me share that I will be naming an executive director for the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) soon.

Reflecting the emphases from this emerging strategic plan, I want to update you on a few significant staff and organizational matters. Global Ministries directors and staff have heard me talk before about the work of our new Mission Engagement unit. We

have made two recent shifts that reflect our understanding of the importance of Mission Engagement in connecting the church in mission. First, our Mission Advocates – those missionaries serving in the United States that help to connect Global Ministries to churches and conferences in each of the jurisdictions – are now part of the Mission Engagement team. Second, our Global Mission Relationships unit, which includes our area liaisons that maintain relationships with church partners around the world, are now also part of the Mission Engagement unit. Our global engagement as a mission agency will be focused through this unit. You can see on the screen a picture of our Global Mission Relations staff meeting together with the GBHEM regional Lead Hub Directors here in Atlanta a month ago.

We will recognize the life and service of the Rev. Edgar Avitia later this morning, and I want to announce that I have named two people to provide coverage for the Latin America and Caribbean region: the Rev. Luis de Souza Cardoso will be the point person for our relationships in South America, while the Rev. Cristian Schlick will be the point person for our relationships in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. These appointments were initially both interim, but I am working with them on making them long-term.

Relationships with fellow Methodist churches in Latin America and the Caribbean are an important area for us to invest in. Along with representatives from GBHEM, we had a productive meeting with leaders from the Methodist Church of Brazil at the end of January, and you can see a picture on the screen there. I am hoping to convene a regional consultation with leaders from across Latin America and the Caribbean next year.

Before concluding, I want to share that we have been reviewing all our processes and systems, and you saw the evidence of some that work yesterday. We are moving toward centralizing our granting function and also relooking at all our internal processes, many of which have been in place for decades, when we had plenty of resources to implement them. The time to relook at all of this is now with increasingly diminishing resources and staffing.

Secondly, our alignment work with GBHEM that you will hear more about later today will be a huge focus of the work of our staff. We are also working closely with UMCom on several projects and engaging with other agencies as well.

Conclusion

I want to close with a quote from Global Ministries' Theology of Mission statement that we keep returning to as an agency: "The Spirit is always moving to sweep the church into a new mission age. With openness and gratitude, we await the leading of the Spirit in ways not yet seen as God continues to work God's purposes out in our own day in a new way." A new age may bring us excitement and expectation. It may also bring us fear and uncertainty. Certainly, it will bring us change. But, however we experience the changes associated with being in a new mission age, we can take strength from knowing that God's Spirit is with us. It is God's Spirit that will continue to work in and through us, and together we rededicate ourselves to participating in God's mission, now and in the times to come.