



UpBeat

A special session of the US National Board was held February 14-15 in Huntington, Ind. Bishop Paul Hirschy called the meeting in the wake of the defeat of the referendum to join the Missionary Church. People were asking, "What happens now?" The National Board tackled that question.

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The 40-some members of the National Board made decisions which point toward a major restructuring of the US National Conference. Most significantly, if their actions are adopted in June 2005 by the US National Conference, the annual conference structure will come to an end. In its place will be just one conference, national in scope, consisting of all 250 United Brethren churches in the United States. Those churches will be organized into "cluster groups" of about seven churches. The bishop will appoint the leaders of these groups.

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None of the decisions made by the National Board regarding structure are final. They require changes in the Discipline, and only the US National Conference can do that. A simple majority of the 65 US National Conference members, meeting in June 2005, can make these changes official. If adopted, they most likely wouldn't take affect until January 2006.

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The National Board heard two presentations regarding a possible new structure for the church: one from Bishop Hirschy, and one from Dr. Anthony Blair on behalf of UB Hope (which, Dr. Blair announced, has now disbanded as an organization). Both presentations envisioned organizing our churches into smaller groups and letting them serve as the key entity for pastoral accountability and relationships. Both proposals also advocated eliminating the role of conference superintendent.

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In October, UB members had approved (by 86%) a referendum which would put the US National Conference on a two-year cycle (as opposed to every four years). In addition, every local church would be entitled to at least two delegates--the pastor and a lay delegate. The US National Board built on this foundation. They passed several motions which describe key aspects of the new structure. The details will then be fleshed out by study committees during the next two months.

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ONE CONFERENCE - NATIONAL IN SCOPE

The first official motion in regard to structure was, "That whatever structure we adopt include only one annual conference, with the boundaries the same as that of the current national conference." This motion passed, and became a foundation for everything that followed. It involves eliminating the current annual conferences. All 250 churches in the United States will now, in effect, be part of the same conference. However, there is room for maintaining relationships and cooperative ministries which exist as part of the current annual conferences.

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CLUSTER GROUPS

All US churches will be organized around "cluster" groups of about seven churches, each with a cluster group leader appointed by the bishop. Every pastor and every church must be part of a cluster. The following motion helped describe the cluster approach:

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“That the National Conference consist of clusters of pastors and congregations.

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“That a cluster be defined as a group of five or more congregations whose primary purpose is accountability and relationship for pastors and congregations.

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“That each pastor and each congregation be required to join and participate in one such cluster.

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“That such clusters be approved by the Executive Leadership Team.

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“That the assignment of clusters be voluntary on the part of the pastor and congregation.”

Cluster groups will be a place for building relationships, mutual encouragement, training, coaching opportunities, and peer accountability. Bishop Hirschy's proposal called for hiring a national Healthy Church Director to

spearhead the development of the clusters and training of the cluster leaders.

A MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION

The US National Board approved, 28-0, a motion requiring each local church to sign a “covenant” with the US National Conference every two years. The motion, as adopted, goes like this:

“That the Church of the United Brethren in Christ become a membership organization that requires every church to sign a covenant prior to each national conference that affirms:

“1. They are committed to the Confession of Faith.

“2. They are passionate about fulfilling the Great Commission in their local church.

“3. They are interested in partnering with other like-minded churches.

“4. They agree with the core values of the National Conference.

“5. They are willing to pay an annual partnership fee" [what we currently call “assessments”].

Churches will pay a certain percentage of their tithes and offerings (minus missions and building costs) directly to the national headquarters (since there will no longer be conferences through which to channel money). This will probably be 3-4%.

US NATIONAL BOARD

The delegates also approved a motion to do away with the US National Board. With the National Conference meeting every two years, it was felt that the Executive Leadership Team could handle any business in the interim.

STUDY COMMITTEES

Numerous details remain. Two committees have been established—one focused on the cluster group level, the other on the denominational level. They need to have their work done sometime in April, so they can pass it on to the Discipline Revision Committee, which will then prepare the proposals for submission to the National Conference. The study committees have much work to do by then.

NATIONAL BOARD MATERIALS ONLINE

Information about the National Board and the upcoming US National Conference is available on the UB website. You can download the presentations made to the National Board by both Bishop Hirschy and Anthony Blair. Other reports and materials will be posted as they become available. Go to this address: <http://www.ub.org/nb/>

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