



2016 General Conference Reflections By Rev. Dr. Samuel Royappa

“Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; He rises to show you compassion.” (Isaiah 30:18)

After two hectic weeks in Portland, Oregon, I came home with a heavily loaded question: "Why did I go to General Conference?" As a way of examining this question, I would like to share with you a brief evaluation of our General Conference work. How do we evaluate the 2016 General Conference? Although expectations for what would be accomplished at General Conference are diverse and numerous, I raise a few evaluative questions concerning the outcomes of our time together.

- What did we, accomplish as a General Conference?
- What is the fruit of our apportionment dollars (\$12 million)?
- How were we guided in our two weeks of worship fellowship and deliberation by Christian and Methodist values?
- How did we stay and grow in love with God and people?
 - What good did we do?
 - Was any harm done and if so, in what way?
 - How was harm prevented?
- What were our growing edges? Where could we make improvements?”
- How did we make disciples?
- In what ways were we able to transform the world?
- What valuable lessons for the future did our time at the 2016 General Conference teach us?

As I was intentionally looking for criteria to evaluate the performance and fruitfulness of the 2016 General Conference, I found one of my favorite resources, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*, by Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger. The book's four-fold principles, *clarity, movement, alignment, focus*, have challenged me in ministry to embrace simplicity. This means, clear understanding, logical flow, same-page philosophy and focused direction are the keys to making church-work simple and productive, at any level. Please allow me to briefly share with you how these four principles or lens can be used to see the fruitfulness of 2016 General Conference.

CLARITY AND COMPLEXITY

Our Church is blessed with a clear mission statement of who we are and what we are called to do - loving God, loving people and serving the needy - thus making disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world. The content is clear, but the General Conference process to apply the content became complicated, beginning with our struggles over Rule 44. Many delegates were confused over the intent, introduction and implementation of Rule 44. There was no clarity of commitment to the process. I am sure few will argue over the need for clarity in all we do. Our Church is rapidly becoming more and more complex, for some, the evolution of our Church may lead to confusion rather than clarity.

Holy Conferencing can be a means by which confusion gives way to clarity. However, Holy Conferencing should not be an element of our administrative structure, but rather part of a movement

from learning to growing, and from growing to leading, eventually making a difference in the lives of people. Our founding father, John Wesley, regularly gathered the first Methodist Disciples of Christ together within a covenantal relationship, coupled with a sense of accountability to converse around the relevancy of active faith, to share testimonies, and to ask the right questions pertaining to faith and ministry. It was a time of relational *Koinonia* and practical *kerygma*. The early disciples called “Methodists” felt their hearts, minds and souls strangely warmed at each and every Holy Conferencing moment. This means it was a source of spiritual encouragement and nourishment.

MOVEMENT AND STAGNANCY

People and ministries should be able to move clearly from one stage to another, with more creative need-based ministries. John Wesley gathered all of the Methodist preachers in 1744 for a conference in London. After the Methodism spread in America, the preachers gathered in Philadelphia in 1773. The Methodist Episcopal Church continued to gather every four years, since 1792. Our church has been moving from abolition of slavery to global health, now towards a global constitution, a Global Book of Discipline with Global Social Principles. Wesley launched not a Church or a denomination, but a revival movement. Our Church started locally in England but now a proud global Church, with 131 Annual Conferences in four continents. Thanks be to God!

How do we move away from stagnation? A total of 1,044 petitions were offered during the 2016 General Conference. Two-thirds of the petitions were acted upon by the legislative committees and then by the plenary. One-third died and got lost either at legislative level or at the plenary. The good news is that we approved legislation empowering the 2020 General Conference to improve our legislative process.

ALIGNMENT AND DISORDER

According to the research, (as recorded in the book, *Simple Church*), there is a highly significant relationship between church vitality and alignment. If we want to maximize everyone’s energy in our Church, we must recruit on the process, offer accountability, implement the same process everywhere, unite leaders around the process, and ensure that new ministries fit. There did not seem to be a clear alignment at the 2016 General Conference between the flow of the Conference and the mission or primary purpose of our Church.

I invite readers to reflect on a question. In spite of a lot of *energy* during plenary, was there or did you experience *church vitality*? I felt there were *too many points of order*, with and without reasons. This process led us to *round holes and square pegs*, lengthening the legislative process in ways that felt unhealthy. If our Church is to have a greater level of commitment toward spiritual reformation and world-transformation, it may be time to explore alternative(s) to *The Robert Rules of Order* that can be used at all levels from Charge Conference to General Conference. Our Church needs a form, a system, a structure, and a tool to leverage the mission. Failing will mean disorder will continue.

FOCUS AND DISTRACTION

In December 1784, the famous Christmas Conference of preachers was held in Baltimore at Lovely Lane Chapel. The focus was to chart the future course of the Methodist movement in America. What was the future of Methodism going to be? What was the focus of 2016 General Conference? An obvious purpose was to chart the *beyond-2016* course of the Methodist movement. However, it seems apparent through the recommendations of the Council of Bishops that the areas of human sexuality and unity of the Church were significant focuses of the 2016 General Conference.

I support the emerging *Sexuality Study Commission*, which is to address these two critical areas, directly and indirectly. However, my fear is that our present parliamentary process has the potential of continuing the painful majority/minority divide in our Church. Another fear is the membership composition of the Commission. This can happen if the Council of Bishops is not consensual with their nominations, perhaps due to a strong majority preference. It will be important that Commission membership include representation from groups that are passionate about their theological convictions.

Also important is that the commission “stay the course” on their focus and not add fuel into fire. I also feel called to trust our Church leadership, the process and above all, the power and promise of our Awesome God - "I will build my church." "I will be with you." "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

NEED FOR DIVINE HEALING

In case of a Special General Conference, bishops should lead the Church with a clear vision for the future UMC. In the midst of current reality around human sexuality, there is a wounded spirit all over our Church. We usually think of wounds occurring in battles or during a fight or war, but the spirit too can be wounded. I tell you; such wounds are deeper and more painful than a physical wound. The wounds I am talking about here usually arise from one of two things: serious hurts or deep horrors. I invite our bishops to lead us with holistic healing from the past and present wounds, whether they are serious hurts or deep horrors. I believe bishops are to prayerfully consider steps or ways of healing from hurts before moving forward with an action plan. Multiple levels of healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and releasing ourselves from our past and present hurts can lead to a fresh start/a new beginning. Jesus asked the person who had been ill for 38 years; ‘Do you want to get well?’ As a Church of Jesus Christ, do we want to get well?

My reflection ends with a reminder of the great OT miracle story, recorded in Numbers 21:17, which reads, "Spring up, O well, sing about it." The people of Israel were traveling through desert's barren sands, and were desperately looking for water. The Lord told Moses to gather people together, so that He would give them water. They gathered and started digging deep into the burning sand, while singing, “Spring up, o well! Sing about it.” Suddenly, a miracle occurred that a rush of water appeared, filling the well, and running along the ground.

This means that they received the river of blessings because of faith in a hopeful future and praise about the future water. The 2016 General Conference was filled with so many praises for bringing forth water. In spite of challenges, debates, uncertainty on critical issues, and frustrations--like barren sands, singing praise songs of faith will bear fruit. Are we praising and thanking God enough for both the countless blessings of the past that He has showered upon us and the blessings that He has in store for our future? I believe, as a Church, what we went through at the Conference in Portland, what we go through post-Conference, and what we will continue to go through are all actually blessings in disguise. May we commit to praise God in advance for the blessings yet to come!

Let me close with these (biblical) prayers that become a source of my hope and our hope:

"I will not let you go unless you bless me/us/our church."
 "Thy will be done on earth/in our church, as it is in heaven."
 "Not my/our will, but yours be done."
 "Spring up, O well, sing about it."
 "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me/us?"
 "Comfort, comfort my/our people, says your God"

Samuel J Royappa
 Delegate to 2016 General Conference
 Wisconsin Annual Conference
 Website: www.samroy.org
 Twitter: @RoyappaS