

**A Toolkit for Area Committees on Episcopacy**  
**North Central Jurisdiction**  
**The United Methodist Church**

**Introduction**

The Annual Conference (or Area) Committee on Episcopacy performs many important functions in relationship to the bishop residing in or presiding over the area. These functions are described in paragraph 637.3 in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2012*, as follows:

3. The functions of the conference committee on episcopacy shall be:
  - a) To support the bishop of the area in the oversight of the spiritual and temporal affairs of the Church, with special reference to the area where the bishop has presidential responsibility.
  - b) To be available to the bishop for counsel.
  - c) To assist in the determination of the episcopal needs of the area and to make recommendations to appropriate bodies.
  - d) To keep the bishop advised concerning conditions within the area as they affect relationships between the bishop and the people of the conference agencies.
  - e) To interpret to the people of the area and to conference agencies the nature and function of the episcopal office.
  - f) To engage in annual consultation and appraisal of the balance of the bishop's relationship and responsibilities to the area and annual conferences, the jurisdiction, general Church boards and agencies, and other areas of specialized ministry, including, at all levels, concern for the inclusiveness of the Church and its ministry with respect to sex, race, and national origin, and understanding and implementation of the consultation process in appointment-making.
  - g) To report needs for episcopal leadership to the jurisdictional committee on episcopacy through the duly elected conference members of that committee.

In view of the importance of these functions, the North Central Jurisdiction Committee on Episcopacy has developed this "Toolkit" for Area Committees on Episcopacy as a resource for faithful and fruitful work with their respective bishops.

## Number and Pattern of Meetings

Paragraph 637.2 directs the Area Committee to meet at least annually. Experience has shown that one annual meeting alone is not sufficient to develop a productive and supportive relationship between the bishop and the committee. A single meeting per year also tends not to provide a sufficient basis for communication and collaboration with the North Central Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy (NCJCOE). Many area committees have found that three or four meetings per year can build a relationship of trust, good communication, and common vision and understanding. This toolkit's recommendations are based on that experience. Thus, the NCJCOE expects each of the respective area committees on episcopacy in our jurisdiction to meet with its bishop at least three (3) times per year. In addition, the assistant to the bishop may be invited to the meetings.

An Area Committee usually experiences two cycles of activity, one annual and one quadrennial. The annual cycle focuses more on the bishop and his/her ministry in the episcopal area as it is exercised during the year. The customs and culture of the area and its annual conference(s) and churches, in interaction with the "functions of the conference committee on episcopacy" detailed in ¶637.3 of the *Book of Discipline (2012)*, help shape the agenda within the annual cycle. This is reflected in the suggestions for meeting agendas listed below.

The quadrennial cycle occurs because of the itinerant nature of episcopacy in The United Methodist Church, and because of the role of the Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy in assigning bishops to episcopal areas. Bishops are assigned to their areas for one quadrennium (four years) at a time, and may serve for 2 or 3 successive quadrennia in one area (¶406, *Book of Discipline (2012)*). The movement of bishops means that there are several recognizable phases or periods in a bishop's time of service:

- A startup, introductory period in the quadrennium, beginning with a welcome and followed by a period of leading, learning, and developing relationships.
- There is a mid-point, when the bishop feels prepared to lead and must figure out how to lead the area for years to come. Yet, he/she may need to consider the possibility of completing a term, leaving a legacy of some accomplishments along with some incomplete plans or dreams.
- Toward the end of each quadrennium, the assessment and profiling process of the Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy, in preparation for Jurisdictional Conference, intrudes upon the agenda. Depending upon the

tenure of the bishop, conversations about closure, farewell, and transition may be appropriate.

In light of this cycle, the agenda topics suggested for the 3 – 4 meetings held each year will be adapted, or even preempted, year by year. The organizing and preparing for the Jurisdictional profiling process, in particular, can demand extensive time and energy on the part of the Area Committee. Care should be taken, however, that the ongoing purpose of advice, counsel and support are not totally lost, even in the midst of pressing business.

Be especially mindful when scheduling meetings that they are inviting and inclusive of all members, especially young adults and laity. Consider travel time and using electronic communication as well.

## Confidentiality

In doing its work, the Area Committee on Episcopacy needs to exercise a high level of confidentiality, in order to be helpful to their bishop. This can be in tension with the responsibility of the committee to “interpret to the people of the area and to conference agencies the nature and function of the episcopal office.” (§637.3e) It is important for the committee to discuss, along with the bishop, how confidentiality is going to be regarded and practiced in such arenas as the recording notes and minutes of meetings, in conversations outside the committee, and in communications with the annual conference. The parameters and practices of confidentiality should be agreed upon, and members should be held accountable for them.

Area Committees should also discuss with their bishop the circumstances and occasions when it might be helpful or needful for the committee to meet without the bishop present. The matter could be fairly practical, such as the planning of a party for the bishop to celebrate some occasion. Or, the need may be profound, as when there is high-level conflict or breakdown of communications that needs to be addressed thoughtfully and intentionally. Once the issue of such “executive sessions” is addressed, agreed-upon procedures can be followed to call and hold the meeting(s), without any prejudice as to cause or intent. If the committee is to meet without the bishop, it would be wise to follow the protocols established for pastors and Staff-Parish Relations committees, so that no secret meetings are held, all parties are appropriately notified, and prompt follow-up consultations occur. (See (§258.2.e), *Book of Discipline* (2012))

## Suggested Agenda

Many area committees have found that having a stated agenda for each meeting enhances the focus of the conversation and enables a better stewardship of time for members. Here is a simple outline on which a meeting agenda might be based:

- 1) Devotions and prayer (tithing your time, 12 minutes for a 2 hour meeting).
- 2) Introductions & brief sharing. Be sure there is a designated secretary to list those present & absent, and to take notes as deemed appropriate.
- 3) Purpose for the meeting. (See suggestions for themes listed below.)
- 4) Covenant regarding confidentiality. Discuss the parameters of confidentiality at every meeting, including the extent of meeting notes. Usually, notes should be general in nature and for future committee use.
- 5) Questions and interaction.  
Under this heading, many area committees include:
  - A report from the bishop
  - A report from the Assistant to the Bishop (as relevant)
  - A “housing report” regarding the episcopal residence
- 6) Summary of follow up assignments for accountability.
- 7) Planning: set next meeting and theme.
- 8) Close with prayer.

## Suggested Themes/Topics for Discussion

The Jurisdictional Committee urges Area Committee leaders and members to be “SMART” about their work, setting goals and planning agendas that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely<sup>1</sup>. For example, a SMART GOAL for Area Committees on Episcopacy in general might be: Every Area Committee on Episcopacy (COE) will meet 3-4 times per year for meaningful conversation and review of the resident bishop, in collaboration with the Jurisdictional COE.

Following are some suggestions for themes or topics to guide conversations with bishops throughout one year:

### MEETING 1—VISION, GOALS, PLANS

In the first year with a new bishop, team building will be an important part of the first meeting of COE.

- What are you excited about re: strategy/mission? What are the specific goals to implement strategy?

- What are your innovative or creative ideas that might hold potential for guiding us, especially in the area of attendance and membership growth?
- What are your goals for this quadrennium? (Note—encourage SMART goals<sup>1</sup>)
- What are your gifts or strengths and how will you utilize them?
- What 2 or 3 leadership skills, gifts, or strengths have you brought to this Episcopal area and how will you utilize them?
- Where are you encouraged by progress? Where do experience struggle or feel blocked?
- What is your response to the Council of Bishops' Call to Action<sup>2</sup> and the other denominational initiatives that seek to guide or influence your work?
- What do you see as the core issues of this annual conference?
- What is your vision for this Episcopal area? (use for year 2, 3, 4)

At the next meeting, we will discuss how the Bishop balances General church responsibilities with area demands.

## MEETING 2—RELATING TO LOCAL CHURCHES, DISTRICTS & THE GENERAL CHURCH

- What are the ways you are out in the districts?
- How do you understand and practice your supervisory role as a bishop?
- Give us examples of how you communicate with clergy. With laity.
- How are new leaders being identified?
- How are decisions being made?
- How are you balancing the demands of the General Church and our area needs? What percentage of your time goes to the General Church?
- What critical/significant things are happening in our area? Signs of fruitfulness? What needs attention?
- Give us examples of how you have been successful in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?
- Where are you encouraged by progress? Where do experience struggle or feel blocked?
- Let's look at the goals you set at the beginning of the year. How do you view the progress toward meeting those goals?

At the next meeting we will look at progress and self-care.

### MEETING 3—SELF-CARE, FAMILY, PROGRESS REPORT

- How are you caring for self and family, spiritually, physically & emotionally?
- What have you initiated in the four areas of focus<sup>3</sup> this year? How have you communicated that?
- What direction do you see as most important in this conference during this quadrennium?
- How would you rate yourself on being “tech savvy”?
- What are your gifts? How are you able to use them in this conference?
- Tell us about your vacation plans for the year. Have you planned for renewal leave?
- Where are you encouraged by progress? Where do experience struggle or feel blocked?
- Let’s look at the goals you set at the beginning of the year. How do you view the progress toward meeting those goals?

At the next meeting, we will review vision and goals.

### MEETING 4—REVIEW, ASSESSMENT, ACCOUNTABILITY

- What visioning have you done with and for our area?
- Let’s look at the goals you set at the beginning of the year. How do you view the progress toward meeting those goals?
- What 2 or 3 leadership skills have you brought to this Episcopal area and what are the results thus far?
- Where are you encouraged by progress? Where do experience struggle or feel blocked?
- What is your response to the Council of Bishops’ Call to Action<sup>4</sup> and the other denominational initiatives that seek to guide or influence your work?
- What do you see as the core issues of this annual conference? How are you leading in those areas?
- How are decisions being made?

## Additional Resources

In addition to guided conversation, it may be helpful for an area COE to utilize other resources for increasing knowledge, insight or skill regarding leadership in the church. These might include such inventories as Strength-Finders, DiSC, Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Enneagram, etc. The following resources could also be considered:

- a) *Necessary Endings*, by Henry Cloud
- b) *Leading Change*, by John Kotter
- c) *Managing Transitions*, by William Bridges
- d) *Focus: The Real Challenges That Face The United Methodist Church*, by Lovett H. Weems
- e) *Seven Levers*, by Robert Schnase

A sample of the most recently-used survey instrument utilized by the Jurisdictional COE in developing profiles of areas and bishops is also attached.

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<sup>1</sup> See the website for SMART goals: <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/smart-goals.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See the website for the “Call to Action for a description of the mandate of the Call, the background research conducted, and for a copy of the Report on the Call to Action. <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/call-to-action>

Research commissioned by the Call to Action team found that, for the most part, healthy and vital churches include the following in their makeup:

- Prevalence of small groups
- Empowerment of lay leadership
- Mix of traditional and contemporary worship
- Inspirational messages
- Effective pastoral coaching

<sup>3</sup> The brief version of the “4 Areas of Focus” established by the General Conference is:

- Engaging in ministry with the poor
- Improving global health
- Developing principled Christian leaders
- Creating new and renewed congregations

For more information, see also: ”: <http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/four-areas-of-focus-overview>

<sup>4</sup> See the website for the “Call to Action for a description of the mandate of the Call, the background research conducted, and for a copy of the Report on the Call to Action. <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/call-to-action>

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