

Holston Conference Strategy Team Proposal: Frequently Asked Questions

How much input do I, or my church, have in the outcome of the recommendations ultimately made by the Conference Strategy Team or the Committees with whom it works?

The Comprehensive Conference Strategy is actually a *process* for change. By approving the proposal, the process you are adopting gives you the opportunity to provide input on an issue, either through participation on one of the task forces or by providing feedback to the Team as it goes through the evaluation process. No task force operates in isolation; in order for it to be successful, it will necessarily be engaging others in the evaluation process. Keep in mind that all of these procedures are ongoing – the proposal is not just a one-time activity. Thus, there will be recurring opportunities to have your voice heard on the issues that interest you.

How was the Conference Strategy Team created?

The Conference Strategy Team was formally convened in September of 2015 following meetings among clergy and lay members of Holston Conference and church strategists including Dr. Tom Bandy and United Methodist bishop Robert Schnase. From among those persons, Bishop Taylor selected a group to include certain strategic areas for representation on the Team including district superintendents, lay members, local church clergy and conference staff representing the ministry areas affected by strategic discernment. The final team consisted of 13 persons - nearly twice as many recommended by consultants - to broaden the diversity of representation, experience and skill sets. Notwithstanding, the Conference Strategy Team recognizes that not every demographic is equally represented on the Team and, in response, has been intentional in seeking input from a spectrum of persons and backgrounds throughout the process to be sure that those interests are properly recognized in our deliberations. For a list of Conference Strategy Team members and their backgrounds, please go to ac.holston.org.

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How did you decide on proposing only 9 Districts?

The Conference Strategy Team assessed several options, including a review of only 7 districts or making no changes, but determined that 9 districts gives the Conference the best chance to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources, while maintaining a manageable administrative workload *at this time*.

Here are three things to clarify:

- Given the demographics, geography and economic realities within the physical boundaries of Holston Conference, it is simply not feasible to perfectly and evenly allocate the resources of Holston Conference in a way such that each District is equal. The Proposal represents our *best effort* to do so.
- The 9-District Proposal is not simply a ‘merger of districts’. The boundaries of every district in the Conference will change as a result of this process. The actual boundaries will be determined by evaluating the 6 criteria listed in the Proposal to build the capacity of each district to do mission and ministry.
- The boundaries of the proposed 9 districts have not yet been determined; the map provided in the *Book of Reports* is merely a close rendition of what it might look like. If the Conference Strategy Proposal for evaluating the location and boundaries of districts is approved, the District Superintendents and the Bishop will ultimately determine the actual boundaries in accordance with the evaluation process and their authority set forth in *The Discipline*.

Some data that helps explain this effort to make resources more equitably distributed from one end of the Conference to another is provided below:

- Under the present 12-district structure, there are 8 districts that account for less than 9% of the total resources reflected in total church budgets across the conference; and 2 of those districts account for merely 3% of the total resources.
- Under the proposed 9 district structure, preliminary analysis shows that the number of districts accounting for less than 9% of total resources is reduced from 8 to 3, with the smallest district portion increased to at least 5% of total resources.
- CST also reviewed a 7-district structure where the district accounting for the smallest portion of conference resources was increased to 6% of total resources; but in this scenario, 2 other districts accounted for nearly 50% of all other resources – which did not advance the goal of allocating resources more equitably across the Conference.

Where will the District Offices be located?

The location of district offices will be determined through the evaluative process set forth in the Proposal.

How was the decision made to appoint only 9 District Superintendents?

The decision to appoint 9 district superintendents in 2017 was an independent decision made by the district superintendents and the bishop – not the Conference Strategy Team - in light of the urgent financial pressures faced by Holston Conference this year. (See, Bishop's Statement on the Conference website).

However, their decision underscores the need for a 'Comprehensive Strategy Plan' to avoid the necessity of the Cabinet having to make these types of urgent decisions in the future.

What is timeline for the realignment of district boundaries?

If the Proposal is approved, we intend to immediately begin working on the evaluation process. We aspire to have the work done in the next year but there are many variables and factors that can affect the timing.

Is the Conference Strategy Team Proposal going to save the Conference money?

Saving money was not the purpose of the Conference Strategy Team Proposal. However, if the strategy is implemented, we anticipate that the product of a more fruitful mission and ministry in Holston Conference will also be a healthier financial position

How will District Superintendents manage larger Districts?

The Proposal incorporates administrative relief with deployment of staff and the missional hub structures so that not only do district superintendents have time and resources to supervise, but more opportunities to meet the goal of being 'Chief Missional Strategists' as well.

Will the number of Conference Staff decrease?

We do not know. The Conference personnel has already experienced a net decrease of 12 employees over the past several years, but what we are offering is an evaluation process to determine what the optimal number of staff is, where and how they will be deployed in the Conference.

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What does the ‘Wellness Check’ (in the 5th component, ‘Exercising Financial Stewardship’) involve?

The Conference Strategy Team recognizes that district superintendents are already in the best position to be aware of the health of churches – and attuned to their needs - so the evaluation is not new. However, advocating the consistent use of Vital Signs and Statistics provides an opportunity to uniformly assess how financial resources are being allocated and to help get churches to a healthier place. But one additional expected consequence of this uniform process is that there will be a focused plan to act upon the results of the evaluation process.

Does this mean that the Conference will be closing more churches?

We hope not. In fact, our hope is that the Conference will experience the growth of *more* churches and ministries. The ‘Financial Stewardship’ component contemplates that if financial resources are wisely allocated in this manner, the net result will be that viable churches and missions hindered by a lack of resources will benefit from this process.

The Conference Strategy proposal lists several ‘task forces’ to implement the evaluation process. How do we know who will be making those decisions?

The Conference Strategy Proposal is designed to involve many more people in the evaluation and decision-making process. In some instances, the procedures require the participation of existing committees – nominated by the Conference Nominations Committee - who have responsibility over those areas. For example, the 6-month clergy evaluation process every 8 years is being managed by the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry; likewise, recommendations on Conference staffing will be made in consultation with the Conference Personnel Resources Committee. Other strategic areas, such as Communications allows the Conference Strategy Team to identify persons with expertise throughout Holston Conference to participate in the process, in addition to the Communications Advisory Council. This gives the Conference Strategy Team the opportunity to

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identify new and effective leaders to become involved in the strategic process based upon knowledge, passion and capabilities.

Will the Annual Conference have a chance to vote on the changes that are made as a result of the Strategic plan process?

It depends. The Conference Strategy Team and the decision-making process is guided by *The Discipline* of the United Methodist Church. To be clear, one goal of the Conference Strategy is to enhance the ability of the Annual Conference to be agile and responsive to God's leading and to changes in the mission field without being unduly impeded by unnecessary bureaucracy. However, changes must still be undertaken within the constraints of what is permitted by *The Discipline*. Thus, some decisions, such as the closure of a church - which is a recommendation brought by the Conference Board of Trustees for approval at the Annual Conference – will still require Annual Conference action. Other decisions, such as streamlining Conference committees and boards may sometimes be made by a task force or sometimes require approval of the Annual Conference, depending upon what is required by *The Discipline*.

When do clergy have to meet the requirements of the support and accountability groups? What is the timeline?

Each clergy person will work directly with his or her District Superintendent to manage a reasonable timeframe to meet these goals, depending upon the individual needs and circumstances of the pastor.

What happens if the United Methodist Church splits in the future?

We have great reason to hope that the United Methodist Church will emerge as one unified body of Christ; the work going on at the general church level is progressing. Nonetheless, the 'strategy' in this proposal is that we are nimble and adaptive to any changes that come our way – making Holston better situated than most to handle any new changes. Furthermore, the Conference Strategy Team firmly believes that waiting to see what happens

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before taking action will push us further behind in making necessary changes to be more fruitful in making disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world – here and now.

Can the Annual Conference just adopt some of the provisions in the Proposal and not others?

The Comprehensive Conference Strategy is engineered so that all of the parts are synchronized to move together. Like mechanical gears, if some of the components are missing, the process will not work as effectively. Please also keep in mind that the proposal is a process for *adaptive change*. Thus, there will always be periodic opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of the Plan in the future and to make adjustments and corrections to the process and/or outcomes following each United Methodist General Conference in years moving forward.

What happens if the Proposal is not Approved at Annual Conference?

We believe that if the Proposal is not approved at Annual Conference, the *best-case* scenario is that things will simply remain the same, which also means that the current trajectory of the Church – including its downward trends – will also continue.

How can people provide input and feedback to the Proposal?

Please attend the Chat Room in the Terrace Auditorium on Monday at Annual Conference or send us a message by E-mail to 'holstonstrategyteam@gmail.com'