



Statement from Central Conference bishops on vaccine offers

January 17, 2022

As Christians, we are called to serve all of God's people without discriminating or choosing only those who agree with us theologically or politically. We are called to be of help to all those in need and not only those who would support our organization's goals and desires.

That is why we are appalled by the action of the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) regarding COVID-19 vaccinations. The WCA has decided to raise funds to assist some United Methodists, mostly in Africa, with getting vaccinations for the sole purpose of making sure that those United Methodists who are delegates to the postponed General Conference would be able to travel to the United States.

While we understand that vaccines are not easily accessible to all people in many parts of the world, we are dismayed that the WCA would choose to help provide vaccines to only a few people and not the community as whole. If the WCA's motives are pure, why not provide vaccines for the entire family of that delegate or the entire church or the community in which the delegate lives?

The world is in the midst of a global pandemic that so far has caused the death of more than 5.5 million people. Currently, the highly contagious Omicron variant has made many countries shut down again and reintroduce severe restrictions due to exponentially growing numbers of people infected. While the United States and Europe are struggling to increase the number of people fully vaccinated and encouraging a third and, in some places, even a fourth shot, countries in Africa are struggling to make vaccines available at all. In the Democratic Republic of Congo for example, less than half a million people out of a population of 80 million are vaccinated.

Furthermore, we know the virus is likely to continue to mutate as long as a significant amount of people are infected. This is why the Connectional Table has called the church to consider vaccine equity a missional priority of the church. The Council of Bishops supports this effort. As vaccine distribution is regulated and controlled by the government in each individual country, the efforts of The United Methodist Church are to focus on advocacy and education. This concerns our future – we are all affected, and we all know people who have been seriously ill or have died from Covid. Jesus called us to care for the least and making vaccines available across the globe and receiving vaccination when possible is a simple matter of obedience to Christ's call and a tangible expression of love of neighbor, and far more important than our own internal struggles in the church. It is time that we wake up to this reality in God's world.

Offering vaccines to General Conference delegates or covering the cost of delegates to travel to places where they can be vaccinated is not an expression of vaccine equity. Rather, it appears as an attempt to benefit those who have been given a special responsibility, and who the donor wishes to fulfill a certain purpose.

Furthermore, the official organizer of the General Conference is the Commission on General Conference, and when individual interest groups begin to offer benefits to delegates, they jeopardize the integrity of General Conference.

The unfortunate thing about the entire process by WCA is that it has all the marks of colonialism which our countries went through in some years ago. The tactics of divide-and-conquer have created chaos and division on the African continent and should not be allowed in our churches. One would have thought that our friends and partners in the WCA would have taken some modest time to consult with the church leaders in the Central Conferences so that we move together in how to implement such a cause. We people called United Methodists from the Central conferences promote unity and we treasure our connectional spirit but we deplore any form of colonialism.

Unfortunately, what we experience time and again is the brazen interference in the affairs of The United Methodist Church in Africa from our brothers and sisters in the WCA. If forming a new denomination means leaving a trail of destruction as we are now experiencing in Africa, we surely need to talk about it as friends and members of the family we call The United Methodist Church.

We, the undersigned bishops, have vastly different perspectives on the issues surrounding human sexuality. But with one accord, we stand together for the cohesion and unity of our beloved United Methodist Church. We will not be dissuaded from seeing one another as brothers and sisters in the church.

We live on different continents, in very different contexts. But together we carry out the task entrusted to us by our church, to be shepherds of the whole flock and to lead the church with honesty and integrity. We do not allow that trust in one another to be undermined.

We represent United Methodists on three continents with a variety of languages and cultures, styles of spirituality and convictions. We share a history which contains some dark and shameful aspects. But we are convinced that we can witness to God's love more powerfully, beautifully, and invitingly if we continue to do so together. We do not allow others to pit us against each other.

Signed:

Bishop Harald Rückert, Europe – president of the Central Conferences College of Bishops

Bishop Eben Nihwatiwa, Africa – president of the Africa College of Bishops

Bishop Rudy Juan, Asia – Philippines College of bishops