

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS CONCERNING

the Way Forward and the Special Session of General Conference

The Arkansas Annual Conference has worked hard to keep you up-to-date about the Commission on a Way Forward and the upcoming 2019 Special Session of General Conference that will occur February 23-26 in St. Louis. We've answered questions, facilitated conversations, published articles, written letters and emails, conducted 17 Town Hall meetings, offered a conference-wide survey, produced videos and made reports at District Conferences and Annual Conference.

In spite of this, however, I've heard a number of you say that it's a real challenge to make sense of what's going on. I fully understand that, and it's why I've created this document that addresses the questions I've heard most often concerning the Commission on a Way Forward and the 2019 Special Session of General Conference.

I suspect you will have more questions after you read this information. Some of them can be answered. But many, as important as they are, cannot be answered right now because the answers will not begin to become clear until the 2019 General Conference takes action. In the meantime, John Wesley's words, "The best of all, God is with us," remind us that we are not alone in these uncertain times.

While I have no idea what the outcome will be this coming February, I am absolutely convinced of five things that will remain true on February 27, the day after General Conference ends: 1) God still is God; 2) People still need Jesus; 3) We still need each other; 4) God still is not done with us yet; and 5) We still are called to create vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped to transform lives, communities and the world.



Bishop Gary E. Mueller
Arkansas Annual Conference
The United Methodist Church
October 1, 2018



Who makes decisions on behalf of the United Methodist Church concerning issues related to human sexuality?

Since the beginning of The United Methodist Church over 200 years ago, the General Conference has been the only body that has the authority to speak officially on behalf of the entire United Methodist Church, including issues related to human sexuality. The General Conference is a legislative body comprised of delegates on a proportional basis from all the annual conferences that make up the global United Methodist Church. Over 40% of the delegates come from outside the United States. There are 864 delegates to General Conference, half laity and half clergy.

Why will there be a Special Session of General Conference in 2019 instead of waiting until the regularly scheduled session in 2020?

The Council of Bishops, which has been given the authority to make such decisions by *The Book of Discipline*, believed it would be helpful to have a Special Session 2019 that could focus solely on matters related to human sexuality rather than trying to squeeze it into the regular quadrennial General Conference 2020 that will have to consider many other items.

Why has all of this come to a head now?

The United Methodist Church has been dealing with these issues for a long time. The 2016 General Conference in Portland asked the Council of Bishops to provide leadership in finding a way forward in the midst of the reality of significant and long-term disagreement concerning issues related to LGBTQ persons and ongoing disobedience to *The Book of Discipline* by church leaders.

How was the Commission on a Way Forward established and why is it playing such an important role?

The Council of Bishops created the Commission on a Way Forward to work on its behalf in developing a recommendation to the General Conference of The United Methodist Church about the best way to address issues concerning human sexuality.

What was the Commission on a Way Forward’s ‘job description’?

The Commission, comprised of 32 diverse individuals with a variety of perspectives, was guided by a “Mission, Vision and Scope” document that includes several key components:

MISSION The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions.

VISION The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible.

SCOPE We should be open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality. Therefore, we should consider new ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions, in understandings of episcopacy, in contextual definitions of autonomy for annual conferences, and in the design and purpose of the apportionment.

What is the result of the Commission on a Way Forward’s work?

The Commission issued a report that includes three plans, each of which outlines a possible future the delegates attending the 2019 General Conference might choose to adopt:

One Church Plan

- removes current language in *The Book of Discipline* that states, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”
- changes the definition of marriage to a monogamous relationship between two adults.

- gives pastors the authority to perform same gender weddings and congregations the right to determine whether same gender weddings can be held in their facilities.
- protects the right of pastors not to conduct same gender weddings.
- protects the right of bishops not to ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals, “The Jurisdictional College of Bishops shall provide for the ordination, commissioning, and licensing of all persons recommended by the Board of Ordained Ministry and the Clergy Session of the Annual Conference in the bounds of its jurisdiction.” (proposed Amendment to ¶415.6)
- allows the Clergy Session of the Annual Conference to vote on motions by the Board of Ordained Ministry regarding the certification, ordination and appointment of self-avowed homosexuals only once every 30 months, unless agreed to by the presiding bishop.
- requires churches leaving the denomination to contribute money equal to their share of the annual conference’s unfunded pension liability.

Connectional Conference Plan

- maintains a common unified theological core consisting of the proposed *General Book of Discipline* that includes the Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, the General Rules and other agreed upon items.
- utilizes shared services by the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits, General Council on Finance and Administration, Archives and History, Publishing House and parts of the General Board of Global Ministries.
- creates three ‘Connectional Conferences’ (Progressive, Unity and Traditional) based on theological perspectives related to accountability, contextualization and justice perspectives.
- allows Central Conferences outside the United States to remain as geographical entities or align with a Connectional Conference.
- gives jurisdictional conferences the authority to determine which Connectional Conference with which to align.
- allows annual conferences, congregations, pastors and bishops to align with another Connectional Conference rather than the one chosen by their jurisdiction or annual conference.

- assigns much of the authority currently given to the General Conference to the Connectional Conferences, including matters concerning the election, assignment, funding and accountability of bishops, ordination standards and the writing of the proposed *Connectional Conference Book of Discipline*.
- redefines and limits the roles of the General Conference, Council of Bishops and Judicial Council.
- requires eight constitutional amendments for implementation.

Traditional Plan

- maintains the United Methodist Church's current stance that states, "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching," the definition of marriage as between a woman and man, and the prohibition of self-avowed practicing homosexuals being certified as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve.
- requires active and retired bishops, annual conferences and Boards of Ordained Ministry to certify that they will uphold, enforce, and maintain disciplinary standards regarding marriage and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.
- prohibits bishops from consecrating bishops and commissioning or ordaining individuals who are self-avowed practicing homosexuals.
- provides a number of measures, including mandatory actions, to ensure increased accountability by clergy and bishops.
- prohibits annual conferences that fail to certify their willingness to uphold disciplinary standards regarding marriage and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals from using the United Methodist name and logo or receiving any funds from The United Methodist Church beginning in 2021.
- allows annual conferences or any group of 50 congregations to form a self-governing church if they are in "irreconcilable conflict for reasons of conscience with the doctrine or moral teachings and requirements of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* on the issues of human sexuality."
- allows local churches that disagree with their annual conference's decision to withdraw and unite with an "autonomous, affiliated, or concordat church."
- requires churches leaving the denomination to contribute money equal to their share of the annual conference's unfunded pension liability.

What is the proposed timeline for the implementation of each of the three plans?

The timeline depends upon which plan is adopted, although revisions changing the timeline could be made by the 2019 Special Session of General Conference or the Judicial Council.

The **One Church Plan** could take effect as early as January 1, 2020 (See ¶508 – Legislation Effective Date). However, in order to give the church time to prepare for the changes, it is recommended the plan not fully go into effect until December 31, 2020.

The **Connectional Conference Plan** would be implemented in the following stages:

- Annual Conferences vote on constitutional amendments in 2019 and early 2020.
- Jurisdictions and Central Conferences align with a Connectional Conference in 2020.
- Bishops align with a Connectional Conference by August 1, 2021.
- Annual Conferences not in agreement with their Jurisdictional Conference decision align with a different Connectional Conference by August 1, 2021.
- Local Churches not in agreement with their Annual Conference decision align with a Connectional Conference by July 1, 2022.
- Clergy align with a Connectional Conference by July 1, 2022.
- Organizational conferences of Connectional Conferences occur in fall 2022.
- First General Conference occurs in 2025.

The **Traditional Plan** would be implemented in the following stages:

- Annual Conferences certify that they will “uphold, enforce, and maintain *The Discipline’s* standards on LGBTQ marriage and ordination” by February 2020.
- Local congregations and clergy decide whether to remain in the denomination during March-April, 2020.
- 2020 General Conference addresses unfinished or deferred work flowing from the 2019 Special Session of General Conference.
- Annual Conferences discern their leadership for 2020-2024 in May-June 2020.
- Residential Bishops must approve one of the two statements in ¶2801.7 in May-June 2020.
- Jurisdictional Conferences meet in July 2020 to elect new bishops based on previous decisions of annual conferences, local churches, bishops, clergy and need.
- General Council on Finance and Administration no longer will receive funds from, or send funds to, annual conferences that have not certified they will “uphold, enforce and maintain the Discipline’s standards on LGBTQ marriage and ordination” as of January 1, 2021.

Where can the entire Commission on a Way Forward Report be found?

- http://docs.arumc.org/Way%20Forward/Way_Forward_Report_-_Final_-_ENGLISH.pdf

Did the Commission on a Way Forward make a recommendation about which plan it prefers?

No. A number of members of the Commission of a Way Forward supported each of the three plans and most Commission members worked to perfect at least two of them.

What action did the Council of Bishops take concerning the Commission on a Way Forward's report?

The Council of Bishops was involved in an ongoing feedback process with the Commission that involved prayer, conversation and informal straw polls. The Council, however, only formally voted once. This occurred at its May 2018 meeting when the following three-part motion was adopted by an overwhelming majority of active bishops:

Motion: *Having received and considered the extensive work of the Commission on a Way Forward, the Council of Bishops will submit a report to the special session of the General Conference in 2019 that includes:*

- *All three plans (The Traditionalist Plan, The One Church Plan and The Connectional Conference Plan) for a way forward considered by the Commission and the Council.*
- *The Council's recommendation of The One Church Plan.*
- *An historical narrative of the Council's discernment process regarding all three plans.*

Rationale: *In order to invite the church to go deeper into the journey the Council and Commission has been on, the Council makes all the information considered by the Commission and the Council of Bishops available to the delegates of the General Conference and acknowledges there is support for each of the three plans within the Council. The values of our global church are reflected in all three plans. The majority of the Council recommends The One Church Plan as the best way forward for The United Methodist Church.*

Did all the bishops who voted for the motion support the One Church Plan?

No. While the One Church Plan received a substantial majority, a significant number of bishops supported one of the two other plans. Many of those who did not support the One Church Plan voted for the final motion because it ensured that all three plans would be available for consideration by the 2019 General Conference.

Why is the Commission on a Way Forward, and not the Council of Bishops, submitting the report to the Special Session?

Judicial Council Decision No. 1360, issued in late May of this year, includes a footnote that clarifies the Council's understanding of the relationship between the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops. Footnote 6 reads, *The undertaking of a 'complete examination' of the subject of human sexuality presupposes that there will be some kind of report, document or study which supports the 'possible revision of every paragraph in our Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality,' which, in turn, presupposes that the Commission (not the Council of Bishops) will put forth legislation to fix the problem. The special General Conference is to consider 'their work,' i.e., whatever the Commission desires to put before General Conference in terms of its 'complete examination.'*

In response to this important footnote, the Council of Bishops and Commission on a Way Forward agreed that the Commission would present the report.

Once the Commission on a Way Forward report was completed, why did it take so long to publish?

The Council of Bishops and Commission on the General Conference believed it was important to release the report simultaneously in all four official languages of the General Conference: English, French, Portuguese and Swahili. The translation process took longer than expected to complete.

What will be before the 2019 Special Session?

The Council of Bishops' revised call for a Special Session of the General Conference issued July 9, 2018 states, "the purpose of this Special Session of the General Conference shall be limited to receiving and acting upon a report from the Commission on a Way Forward based upon the recommendations of the Council of Bishops." This means the report of the Commission on a Way Forward, including the accompanying legislation, will be before the Special Session for consideration.

Judicial Council Decision No. 1360, issued earlier this year, states that other petitions may be submitted by organizations, and lay or clergy members as long as they are in harmony with the Commission on a Way Forward report.

79 petitions were submitted by a variety of individuals and organizations in addition to the 48 offered by the Commission on a Way Forward. 18 have been ruled out of order based on format or other errors. If no formatting issues are found with the remaining 61, they will be printed in *The Advance Daily Christian Advocate*, the official journal of the General Conference. The General Conference Committee on Reference ultimately will decide whether which of these petitions is deemed 'in harmony' with the Special Session of General Conference. Those that are not will be withdrawn from consideration.

Additionally, General Conference delegates have the right to amend any items that are properly before them for consideration.

How will the Special Session process the Commission on a Way Forward's report?

The Book of Discipline establishes the Commission on the General Conference as the entity responsible for structuring the work of any General Conference. This commission currently is finalizing the Special Session's agenda, which should be published around November 12, 2018. The standing rules governing how the 2019 Special Session conducts its business will be those that governed the 2016 General Conference, unless the 2019 Special Session delegates vote to change them.

What happens once the 2019 Special Session acts?

It depends. Any legislative action that is adopted by majority vote of the delegates will be implemented. It's a bit more complicated, however, if the Special Session adopts Constitutional Amendments. These require two-thirds support of the General Conference delegates, as well as an aggregate total of two-thirds of the voting members of all the Annual Conferences across the globe. This means it would be over a year before any Constitutional Amendments were implemented. However, any Judicial Council rulings made after the 2019 Special Session concludes possibly could impact the implementation of actions taken by the Special Session.

What happens if none of the three plans are approved?

The 2016 Book of Discipline, and its current stance related to homosexuality, will remain in effect.

What might change between now and the February 2019 Special Session?

The Council of Bishops formally requested the Judicial Council to review the constitutionality of the three plans submitted by the Commission on a Way Forward in order to better ensure that the Special Session does not act in a way that the Judicial Council later decides is in violation of *The Book of Discipline*. The Judicial Council agreed, and will do so at its regularly scheduled October 23-26, 2018 meeting. This will help facilitate the work of the Special Session because it will allow delegates to make corrective amendments during the February 23-26, 2019 General Conference. It is critically important to note that this means that the three plans, with accompanying legislation, may change substantively prior to the actual Special Session of General Conference in February 2019.

How can I get involved in the process?

First, you can pray that the General Conference delegates from Arkansas and throughout the world will carry out God's will, show the world that Christ's love is more powerful than human differences and make sure that The United Methodist Church keeps the main thing the main thing: creating vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped to transform lives, communities and the world.

Second, you can become part of the "Praying Our Way Forward" initiative that has been launched by the Council of Bishops at: <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/bishops-the-upper-room-launch-phase-3-of-praying-our-way-forward>

Third, you can keep up-to-date with everything by going to the Arkansas Conference website at www.arumc.org

Fourth, you can attend one of the five district-wide Charge Conferences that will be held this fall and receive an update from the Arkansas Conference delegation.

- **Southeast District**
10/14/18 - 3:00 - 5:30 pm
FUMC, Stuttgart
307 E. 4th St.
Stuttgart
- **Northwest District**
12/2/18 - 3:00 pm - 5:30 pm
FUMC Fort Smith
200 N. 15th St.
Fort Smith
- **Central District**
10/21/18 - 3:00 - 5:30 pm
St. James UMC
321 Pleasant Valley Dr.
Little Rock
- **Southwest District**
12/9/18 - 3:00 pm - 5:30 pm
FUMC Hot Springs
1100 Central Avenue
Hot Springs
- **Northeast District**
12/1/18 - 10:00 am - 12:30 pm
FUMC Jonesboro
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How can I contact the lay and clergy delegates who will be representing the Arkansas Annual Conference at the 2019 Special Session of General Conference?

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