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# Looking Back and Looking Ahead

Mar 3, 2021 | Arkansas United Methodist

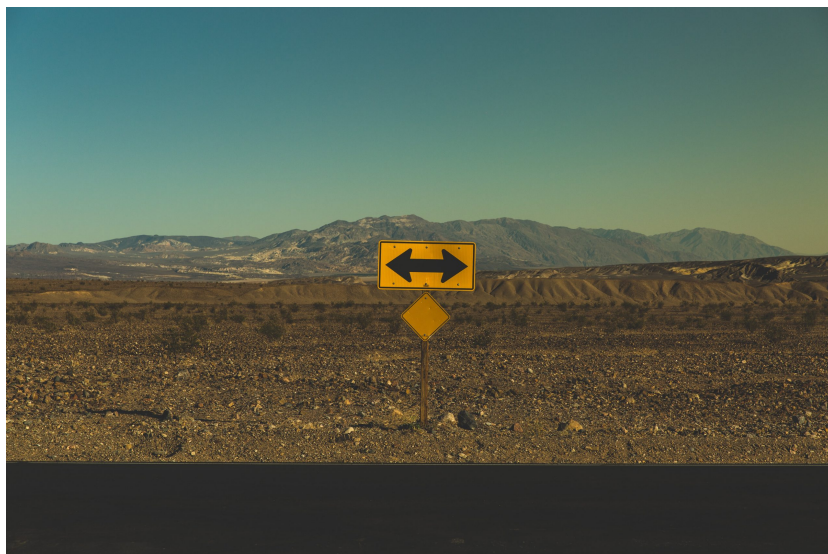


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The United Methodist Church has been filled with people who have significant disagreements for decades about how to involve LGBTQIA+ individuals in the life of the church. The first time the denomination addressed the matter was in The 1972 Book of

Discipline. Every General Conference since has held contentious debates concerning what action to take.

Not surprisingly, matters have become more polarized in recent years. People on both sides of the issue hoped that a definitive decision would be made at the 2016 General Conference. It wasn't. Instead, the delegates narrowly voted to ask the Council of Bishops to lead. The Council chose to do so by appointing the Commission on the Way Forward. The Commission faithfully carried out its work and the Council endorsed the One Church Plan but also forwarded the Traditional Plan and Connectional Conference Plan to the 2019 called General Conference. Most people anticipated, or at least hoped, that this special session would settle the matter once and for all. The General Conference adopted the Traditional Plan that enhanced and clarified the church's existing stance.

Not surprisingly, this action did not settle the matter. The outcome was unacceptable to a portion of the denomination, and organizations were formed and plans made to overturn the changes. At the same time, the Wesleyan Covenant Association began formulating plans for a new Methodist expression that would be more traditional in makeup.

The denomination seemed stymied. That's why the late Bishop John Yambasu began a series of conversations during the summer of 2019 with leaders of more traditional and progressive groups within the church. In the fall of that year, a diverse group was formed from this group and an internationally acclaimed mediator, Kenneth Feinberg, facilitated a process that resulted in the **Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation** that was released in January 2020. It provided a means for Annual Conferences and congregations to join a new Methodist expression, committed significant United Methodist financial resources to address racism, and offered financial support for the starting of new Methodist denominations. While not formally a part of the legislation, the assumption was that the post-separation United Methodist Church would be centrist and progressive in its theology and practice.

Legislation to implement the proposal was submitted and, at the time, many assumed that this was the pathway the United Methodist Church delegates would embrace at the 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis.

Then COVID-19 struck and an unexpected pause ensued. The 2020 General Conference was postponed. The United States experienced a spring and summer of killings of Black citizens by police. The pandemic spread, shuttering normal life and inflicting hardship on billions of people globally.

Attention shifted from human sexuality to COVID, racism and colonialism. Churches were forced to adapt to a virtual world of worship, discipling, fellowship and mission. And in the process, something unexpected happened. Many United Methodists discovered a new appreciation for connectionalism and forged deeper relationships with those with whom they disagreed about a variety of issues, including exactly how the church should include

LGBTQIA+ persons. During this period a number of new ideas were floated as alternatives or enhancements to the Protocol: **The Christmas Covenant**, a proposal from the **Alaska General Conference Delegation**, and the **Overlapping Regional Conference Plan** to name a few. Just a couple of days ago, the **Global Methodist Church** formally announced that it will be a new expression of Methodism in the coming years.

The Commission on the General Conference announced on February 25 that the General Conference has been **postponed and rescheduled for August 29 – September 6, 2022**. At the same time, the Council of Bishops announced that a called session of General Conference will be held virtually on May 8, 2021, to address **12 amendments to the Book of Discipline** that will enable the denomination to carry out some basic responsibilities in the midst of the COVID pandemic and other future possible disruptions. The actual vote will be taken by delegates using paper ballots to ensure that all persons can participate equally in a fair way that allows their voices to be heard. The results of the vote will be announced on July 13, 2021.

So where does all of this leave you?

Some of you are frustrated by yet another delay of General Conference because things have been unsettled for too long and you are ready to get it done and just move on. I understand this and respect your feelings. In fact, I feel that way myself some days.

However, I am seeing increasing numbers of signs that God is at work in the midst of this unexpectedly prolonged pause giving the people called Methodists around the world a new vision of what it means to be a spiritually revived and missionally alive global United Methodist church. In other words, God is doing something in God's own time, which means I need to be patient enough to wait for it because God's timing is always better than my timing.

Everything has been turned upside down in the world, in your life and even in your church during the past year. We now seem to be turning the corner and will soon begin to find our way to the new normal that awaits us. Much will be the same because we are still called to share Jesus' love, help people accept him as Lord and Savior, walk with them as they grow in discipleship, and equip and send them to bring God's transformation to lives, communities and the world. However, we will have to find new ways to carry out this Gospel work.

Our work is quite simple. Pray for our world and beloved church. Keep the main thing the main thing by focusing on Jesus and his mission. Listen carefully to the voice of God about new possibilities for our denomination. And do everything with joy, passion and hope because God is still God, Jesus is still Lord and the Holy Spirit is still at work.