

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
Special Called General Conference of The United Methodist Church 2019
Prepared by the Holston Conference Delegation

Why are we having a special, called General Conference in 2019?

At the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon, it was clear to many of the delegates that our denomination has reached an impasse on the question of how to be in ministry to and with LGBTQ persons. By a vote of 428 to 405, the 2016 General Conference decided not to take up any legislation related to homosexuality and instead authorized the Council of Bishops to form a group that became known as the Commission on a Way Forward, whose task was to “develop a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph in [the] Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality.”

(<http://www.umc.org/decisions/76720>.) Their mission included the exploration of potential ways our denomination could remain intact. The Commission on a Way Forward developed three plans that it presented to the Council of Bishops, which, in turn will report those plans to the called 2019 General Conference for review and action. The report from the Council of Bishops will include all three plans for background purposes, with the Bishops voting to recommend the One Church Model to the General Conference.

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/archives-the-commission-on-a-way-forward>

<http://www.umc.org/topics/general-conference-2019-special-session>

Who was on the Commission On A Way Forward?

The Commission is a diverse body that represents the global United Methodist church with members coming from nine countries with a variety of theological perspectives, representing all sides of the issue on human sexuality; all of these persons were deeply committed to the future of The United Methodist Church. The Commission is made up of one-third laity, one-third clergy, and one-third bishops, and includes younger persons, LGBTQ persons, professors, administrators, pastors, youth ministers, campus ministers, lay leaders, large church pastors, and persons identified with renewal and advocacy groups.

<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-members>

What did the Commission On A Way Forward conclude?

The report of the Commission has remained confidential. However, the Commission provided many press releases on its work and scope.

One thing we know is that the work of the Commission on a Way Forward reflects the fact that members of The United Methodist Church have different opinions on human sexuality and yet desire to find a way to live together, acknowledging these differences. In a worldwide denomination of over 12 million members, differences are to be expected. We also find that human sexuality is only one area of significance where faithful, Bible-believing Christians in The United Methodist Church hold strong and differing opinions. The commission worked with a defined mission, vision, and scope that guided its efforts to develop recommendations to maximize the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world while acknowledging our different global contexts for ministry and our differing understandings of Scripture. Rather than debating who is right or wrong in their opinions and convictions, the 2019 General Conference recommendations from the Commission will present three options for how we can live together.

The Commission has now completed its work and passed on its report to the Council of Bishops. The Bishops received that report and in May voted on the recommendation they will be making to General Conference in February of 2019. Since The United Methodist Church is a global communion, the Bishops are having their report translated into the official languages used at General Conference. That report will be made available worldwide on July 8, 2018.

<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-about-us>

<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-news-and-updates>

When that report is released, where can I find it?

The Council of Bishops' report to the 2019 General Conference will be posted on The United Methodist Church website, [UMC.org](http://www.umc.org), on July 8, 2018.

What do we know about that report right now?

We know that the Council of Bishops' report includes all three of the different plans created by the Commission On A Way Forward: The One Church Plan, The Traditionalist Plan, and the Connectional Conference Plan. Although the Council of Bishops voted by an overwhelming majority to submit all three plans in their report to the 2019 General Conference for background information, the majority on the Council of Bishops recommended "The One Church Plan." We do not yet know all of the details of these three plans, so please know that any current description of them is incomplete, including what follows.

The One Church Plan is built on the belief that local congregations and Annual Conferences around the world find themselves in very different contexts. Under this plan, the restrictive language regarding human sexuality in *The Book of Discipline* would be removed. Each Annual Conference would decide its ordination standards; each local church would decide if they would allow same-sex weddings to take place in their buildings; and each pastor would decide whether to officiate at a same-sex marriage, even in a UMC facility that permits same-sex weddings.

The Traditionalist Plan is built on the belief that our denomination needs to strengthen the current policies, which prohibit the ordination of LGBTQ members and same-sex marriages. Under this plan, the restrictive language regarding human sexuality in *The Book of Discipline* would be retained and the accountability procedure for those breaking the *Discipline* strengthened.

The Connectional Conference Plan is built on the belief that, while United Methodists disagree on this issue of human sexuality, we agree on much more. Under this plan, three organizations (one conservative as The Traditionalist Plan above; one progressive, celebrating the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons; and one which reflects the same contextualization as The One Church Plan above) would be created, all under the larger denominational title “The United Methodist Church.” Each of these three organizations would create its own ordination and marriage standards, while maintaining the ability to be in mission and service together. This plan would require amendments to the UMC Constitution.

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/ask-the-umc-can-you-explain-way-forward-cob-recommendation>
<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodist-bishops-recommend-a-way-forward>

When and where will that 2019 General Conference take place?

The 2019 General Conference of The United Methodist Church will take place in The Dome, part of the America’s Center Convention Complex in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 23-26, 2019. Interestingly, the General Conference will save money by sharing the convention center with a high school and middle school volleyball tournament.

Who can attend the 2019 General Conference?

As a general rule, every General Conference is open to the public. However, the General Conference has the authority to place restrictions on who may attend its sessions beyond the delegates. The Commission on General Conference is expected to levy a registration fee of \$200 for

each visitor who is neither a delegate nor conference staff (the registration cost will rise to \$300 closer to the called session), and it is expected that visitors will be required to wear their registration badges in order to enter the plenary meeting space.

Will the Bishops' report to General Conference be the only legislation the delegates will discuss?

The Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church ruled on May 25, 2018, that petitions in addition to the report of the Council of Bishops may be submitted to the 2019 General Conference “as long as the business proposed to be transacted in such petition is in harmony with the purpose stated in the call [for the 2019 General Conference]. . . . Business not in harmony with the purpose as stated in the call is not permitted unless the General Conference by a two-thirds vote shall determine that other business may be transacted.”

<http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/court-oks-submission-of-other-petitions-for-gc2019>
<http://www.umc.org/decisions/76720>

What is the “call” for the 2019 General Conference?

“The purpose of this special session of the General Conference shall be limited to receiving and acting upon a report from the Council of Bishops based on the recommendations of the Commission on a Way Forward.”

<http://www.umc.org/decisions/76720>.

Who will decide whether a petition is “in harmony” with the call for the 2019 General Conference?

The General Conference itself, through its committees, officers, and presiders, will make that determination.

Who can submit a petition to General Conference for consideration?

“Any organization, clergy member, or lay member of The United Methodist Church may petition the General Conference....” (§507, The Book of Discipline 2016). “Organization” includes virtually any type of group within the UMC.

How do I create and submit a petition to be considered by the 2019 General Conference?

The following link contains specific instructions for the preparation and submission of petitions to the 2019 General Conference. Petitions must adhere strictly to the stated requirements. In general terms, a petition can propose to (i) add language to the Discipline, the Constitution, or a resolution; (ii) amend language of the Discipline, the Constitution, or a

resolution; (iii) delete language from the Discipline, the Constitution, or a resolution; or (iv) propose a new resolution. The following link contains the specific guidelines for submitting a petition.

http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/general-conference/2019/documents/general-conference-2019-petition_submission_instructions.pdf

See also:

<http://www.umc.org/contact/2019-general-conference-petition>

What is the deadline for submitting petitions to the 2019 General Conference?

“Petitions must be postmarked by a national postal service no later than 230 days prior to the opening session of the General Conference (§507.5, *The Book of Discipline 2016*.)” That date is **Sunday, July 8, 2018**. “If petitions are transmitted by a means other than a national postal service, they must be in the hands of the Petitions Secretary no later than 230 days prior to the opening session of the General Conference (§507.6, *The Book of Discipline 2016*.)” This includes overnight carriers. Since the deadline is on a Sunday, the arrival deadline for overnight deliveries will be **Saturday, July 7, 2018**.

Who from Holston Conference will be delegates at that General Conference?

The Holston Conference delegation consists of eight clergy persons and eight lay persons. These are the same persons who were elected to the Holston Conference delegation for the 2016 General Conference.

Clergy: Kim Goddard, Sandra Johnson, Carol Wilson, Wil Cantrell, Randy Frye, Mark Flynn, Paul Seay (alternate), and Dennie Humphreys (alternate)

Lay: Del Holley, Emily Ballard, Becky Hall, John Tate, Bob Lockaby, Karen Wright, Joyce Moore (alternate), and John Eldridge (alternate)

<http://holston.org/about/communications/the-call/volE18/num12/delegates-prepare-for-special-session-2019/>

How can I contact them to offer support, ask questions, or make a comment?

You may contact members of the Holston Annual Conference General Conference delegation by going to the delegation page at our Holston Annual Conference website (Holston.org/delegations) or by sending an email to delegation@holston.org.

Do our Holston delegates represent us like the electoral college members in a presidential election (they must vote as Holston has stated) or like

members of Congress (they represent their area but vote their conscience on individual legislation)?

Each delegate votes according to her or his conscience. In Decision No. 592 (<http://www.umc.org/decisions/41486>), the Judicial Council explained:

“In The United Methodist Church delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conferences are historically and traditionally elected without instruction.... Delegates to General Conference, just as members of an Annual Conference, are bound to do as their conscience dictates what is good for the Church of Jesus Christ, The United Methodist Church in particular, and that only.”

Frankly, this is the only realistic solution because proposals submitted to the General Conference, in the form of petitions, resolutions, and reports, change throughout the legislative process. Very little legislation emerges from committees and floor debate without at least some modifications or amendments – sometimes significant. While a delegate (or an Annual Conference) might favor a particular petition or resolution as it is originally submitted, there is no way to know what the will of an Annual Conference would be on that same legislation – after it has been modified – when it is time to vote. During General Conference, delegates also receive additional information from presentations and arguments during debate on petitions that potentially influences their voting decisions.

Is our General Conference delegation going to have information sessions throughout our Holston Annual Conference to discuss the 2019 General Conference?

Yes, our delegation will be holding information sessions throughout Holston Conference this fall. Details of those dates and times are currently being worked out with our District Superintendents. Our Annual Conference website and District newsletters will provide more information on those gatherings when it is available.

What should our churches be doing between now and the February General Conference?

Members of The United Methodist Church around the world are being asked to participate in “Praying Our Way Forward.” Each of us is asked to pray each day for our denomination and the General Conference delegates between 2:23 and 2:26, am and/or pm (corresponding to the 2/23-2/26 dates of General Conference) and to fast from Thursday evening through Friday noon each week. Guided prayer resources are available for those who desire to participate.

UMCPrays.org

How long has the role of LGBTQ persons in the United Methodist Church been an issue?

The General Conference first publicly debated the issue of homosexuality in 1972. It was there in Atlanta, Georgia, where delegates added the statement, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” to *The Book of Discipline*. Forty-four years later, the 2016 General Conference was still debating those words. The Book of Discipline currently prohibits any clergy person from performing same-sex unions/marriages and prohibits the ordination of a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual” (defined in ¶ 304.3 Qualifications for Ordination, footnote 1, in *The Book of Discipline: "Self-avowed practicing homosexual"* is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual.).

I don't understand why this is an issue. Isn't the Bible clear on the topic of homosexuality?

In the midst of our long-standing General Conference disagreements, one thing has been made abundantly clear to people on all sides of the issue: good, loving Christians disagree over the issue of how to interpret the Bible on the topic of human sexuality. Over the last decade, multiple Christian denominations have split over this topic. There are strong, biblically-based arguments to be made for and against ordination of LGBTQ persons and same-sex marriage.

So, the debate about The Way Forward for United Methodism is not a debate about the authority of the Bible?

No, all sides recognize scripture as the primary authority for our life and faith.

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/theological-guidelines-scripture>

Is the debate about the Way Forward a debate about the interpretation of scripture?

Yes, there is significant disagreement within United Methodism about how to interpret the scriptures in regards to LGBTQ inclusion. We encourage all persons in Holston Conference to explore the ideas put forth by those who disagree with your opinion on this topic. If you are a progressive, you should be able to understand and enunciate the theological and biblical views of those who are conservative. If you are a conservative, you should be able to understand and enunciate the theological and biblical views of those who are progressive. Unless you can do that, then you are not in a position to truly engage in loving

Christian conversation. What the great majority of people find when they explore the ideas put forth on both sides of this issue is that their own views do not change. However, they also realize that persons who think differently than them are not necessarily immoral or ignoring the Bible. When we understand that it is possible to honestly disagree over this complex topic, then we begin to see that those “on the other side” are our Christian brothers and sisters, who are relying on God’s love, Jesus’ grace, and the Holy Spirit’s guidance, just like us.

We suggest reading Chapter 2 of the Rev. Wil Cantrell’s book, *Unafraid and Unashamed: Facing the Future of United Methodism* to explore how different Christians can read scripture and come up with different conclusions.

<https://bit.ly/2ln3n5g>

(Wil Cantrell, *Unafraid and Unashamed: Facing the Future of United Methodism*, Market Square Publishing, Knoxville, TN, 2017.)

Is the purpose of the Way Forward process to settle all the questions related to Biblical interpretation and Christian ethics surrounding LGBTQ inclusion once and for all?

No, the purpose of the Way Forward process is to discern how the United Methodist Church can move faithfully into the future given that large segments of United Methodists disagree strongly about LGBTQ inclusion and are unlikely to reach agreement in the near future.

<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-about-us>

Helpful Additional Resources:

Cokesbury.com has put together a helpful list of books written about this important work. The multipage list of writings can be found at this URL:

<https://www.cokesbury.com/forms/search.aspx?filterGroup=1&txtSearchQuery=Faultlines&pagesize=20&sort=RELEVANCE>