

Dear Congregation, here is a collection of recent Spire articles related to the upcoming General Conference session, including Pastor Myrna's Faith Matters articles. Please use these articles to learn more about the upcoming General Conference and what may follow for our denomination.

In The United Methodist Connection, August 14, 2018:

What is General Conference, and what makes this one special?

General Conference is the only body that can set official policy and speak for the denomination. The General Conference is an international body of nearly 1,000 delegates that meets every four years. The delegates are elected by Annual Conferences (at Annual Conference Sessions) to attend General Conference. They represent all Annual Conferences around the world. Half of the delegates are laity (non-clergy members), half are clergy.

During General Conference, delegates discuss and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. These actions result in a revision of the Book of Discipline, the denomination's book of law, and Book of Resolutions, policies of the denomination on current social issues.

General Conference delegates wrestle with today's issues in light of scriptural teachings and the church's understanding of that teaching. The General Conference decides what the church's official stands and church policies are regarding such issues as human sexuality, abortion, war and peace, as well as determination of ministries and funding.

Although The General Conference usually meets every four years, it is gathering for a special session in 2019. Why?

By action of the 2016 General Conference, this special session, on February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri, is called for the purpose of receiving and acting on a report from the Commission on a Way Forward, based on the recommendations of the Council of Bishops. The 32-member Commission was authorized by General Conference 2016 and appointed by the Council of Bishops to examine paragraphs in The Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and exploring options to strengthen the unity of the church.

In other words, the special session will vote on how the denomination will handle issues around same-sex relationships.

Since the denomination has millions of members worldwide, there is a wide range of beliefs on the topic, including differing beliefs on what the church should permit.

To address these beliefs, the General Conference will likely vote to choose one of three options: The One Church Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the Traditionalist Plan. Each of the three plans proposes different changes in our denomination's structure, so that the United Methodist Church can continue to serve its mission as a unified international body. For each plan, the diverse Commission On A Way Forward considered the United Methodist Church's diverse theological history, possible structural changes, and financial implications to those changes. The plans are explained, in great detail, in a 93-page report.

The Council of Bishops recommends the One Church Plan. However, 150 possible options have also been submitted. Councils and committees are still determining exactly what will be voted on during the special session.

This will affect our congregation. However, the specific effects will depend on which plan is chosen. We will address those plans in future issues of The Spire. In the mean time, you can learn more, and even read the full report at www.umnews.org

In The United Methodist Connection, August 28, 2018:

General Conference 2019: Four possibilities

[These summaries were written by Rev. Jeremy Smith at hackingchristianity.net]

In February 2019, the UMC General Conference will vote to change the Book of Discipline, addressing impasses around human sexuality. There are currently four plans on the table. Two official ones were written by the A Way Forward Commission, and two ones that came from alternative sources.

The **A Way Forward Commission** wrote two Plans (The Connectional Conferences Plan and the One Church Plan) and submitted an alternative plan that it did not write (The Traditionalist Plan). The fourth plan, The Simple Plan, is likewise an alternative plan, initially written for GC2016 by the Reconciling Ministries Network, and updated/submitted by the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus for 2019.

The One Church Plan (OCP) is the only plan endorsed by the Council of Bishops. It attempts to resolve the current impasses over church unity and the inclusion/exclusion of same-gender-loving people by giving annual conferences, congregations, and clergy greater flexibility to make decisions based on individual and communal convictions as well as the needs of specific ministry contexts.

The One Church Plan has the endorsement of substantial majorities of both the Commission on the Way Forward and the Council of Bishops.

The **Connectional Conferences Plan** is perhaps the most complex of the models. As currently written, it would do away with the five jurisdictions in the U.S. and replace them with three (non-geographical) connectional conferences, each with its own theological viewpoint and response to issues related to LGBTQ inclusion. You can imagine a progressive (full inclusion), traditionalist (continued full exclusion), and moderate (each church chooses their own way, basically a small One Church plan) conferences, but there are probably other ways to do it.

These connectional conferences would continue to operate under the big umbrella of United Methodism, sharing common doctrinal standards, jointly supporting mission and ministries outside of the U.S., and utilizing a shared general church administrative infrastructure.

The creation of the connectional conferences would begin at the jurisdictional or central conference level, though annual conferences and local churches may vote by simple majority to join a different connectional conference.

The **Traditionalist Plan** was never fully developed by the Commission on the Way Forward. Only 9 out of 32 "A Way Forward" participants supported it in the end.

If adopted as currently written, this plan would not only strengthen anti-LGBTQ provisions presently included in the Book of Discipline; it would add stricter enforcement at every level of the United Methodist Church.

The Traditionalist Plan broadens the definition of "a self-avowed, practicing homosexual" to include anyone living in the context of same-sex marriage or civil union, and any public statement (including social media) claiming an LGBTQ identity. It removes peer accountability from trial processes and ensures minimum sentences for particular LGBTQ-related offenses. Multiple levels of leadership of an annual conference would have to sign a statement saying they will uphold the heightened LGBTQ restrictions, or else they will lose their identity and funding as a United Methodist entity.

The **Simple Plan**, as the name indicates, is the simplest of all proposals. The Simple Plan only deletes language regarding LGBTQ persons and makes no additions of language of any kind. While any language can be added on the floor or in committee at General Conference for clarity, the primary purpose is to remove the language that excludes LGBTQ persons from full participation in the church. It has a variety of effects on the levels of church involvement.

Faith Matters, September 12, 2018:

The One Church Plan

In February 2019, the UMC General Conference will vote to change the Book of Discipline, addressing impasses around human sexuality. There are currently four plans on the table. Two official ones were written by the A Way Forward Commission, and two that came from alternative sources. ***For the next four Spire issues, we are going to highlight each of the four plans. In this issue, we will focus on the One Church Plan. To see a brief description of each plan, check out the issue from August 28th [above].***

The One Church Plan (OCP) is the only plan endorsed by the Council of Bishops. It attempts to resolve the current impasses over church unity and the inclusion/exclusion of same-gender-loving people by giving Annual Conferences, congregations, and clergy greater flexibility to make decisions based on individual and communal convictions as well as the needs of specific ministry contexts. The One Church Plan has the endorsement of substantial majorities of both the Commission on the Way Forward and the Council of Bishops.

In an attempt to clarify the differences between the four main plans that are likely to come before the 2019 Special General Conference, I'm going to look at how each plan affects the following, listed in **bold**.

Local Churches - In the One Church Plan (OCP), local churches are allowed to decide by vote locally whether to host same-sex weddings; however, no local church is *forced* to state a position on this issue. A local church may indicate whether the congregation is open to receiving LGBTQ clergy or not. There is no provision for "gracious exit" added to the *Discipline*, for churches who disagree with the OCP. Churches that don't agree with it can use current processes found in the *Discipline* to withdraw from the United Methodist Church.

Clergy - In the OCP, clergy are encouraged to file statements expressing their views on homosexuality, which will be used during the appointment process. They are free to decide whether they are willing to preside at same-sex weddings or not, based on individual conscience. This would end trials of clergy for celebrating same-sex weddings. A "gracious exit" is permitted for clergy unable to continue serving in the UMC, including provisions for protecting individual pensions. LGBTQ candidates in the ordination process in a Conference that will not ordain them will be supported in transferring to a more compatible Conference.

Annual Conferences - Rather than vote on whether or not to ordain LGBTQ candidates, Annual Conferences Clergy Sessions will determine whether to permit or forbid such ordinations. Annual conferences will use current Disciplinary processes to facilitate the transfer/gracious exit of candidates/ordained clergy, as well as congregations seeking to leave United Methodism, because they disagree with the OCP.

The General Church/Offices - The OCP maintains current restrictions on funding the "promotion of homosexuality." In the words of the Commission's 93-page report, "The plan maintains the leadership structure of The United Methodist Church, including the Council of Bishops, the General Conference, and the annual conferences as one body and one church. It offers greater freedom to many who desire change but do not want to violate *The Book of Discipline*. ...The United Methodist Church remains in connection, upholding unity of mission without uniformity of practice. The plan grants space for traditionalists to continue to offer ministry as they have in the past; space for progressives to exercise freely a more

complete ministry with LGBTQ persons; and space for all United Methodists to continue to coexist without disrupting their ministries.”

This week, on September 10, the Western Jurisdiction (our jurisdiction) Mission Cabinet endorsed the One Church Plan as “the best way forward for the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church.” The mission cabinet includes the jurisdiction’s bishops, directors of connectional ministries and leadership team chair.

In the first Spire of October, I will offer a summary of one of the Connectional Conference Plan. If you’d like a copy of the complete 93-page report, please email me at pastor@fumcsl.org. I ask that you place (or keep) our denomination in your prayers during this historic time.

Faith Matters, October 10, 2018:

The Connectional Conference Plan

The Connectional Conference Plan option presented by the Commission on a Way Forward (aka The Commission) offers “three values-based Connectional Conferences” in the U.S., and provides for Annual Conferences outside the US (Central Conferences) to align with one of those Connectional Conferences or become one of their own. According to the Commission’s report, the “Connectional Conference Plan addresses the reality of the UMC as it is now.” It, “Balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible,” by creating, “space for each perspective, while maintaining a connection via General Conference, shared doctrine, some shared agencies, and a shared Council of Bishops.”

The three recommended “values-based Connectional Conferences” are the following:

- + **Unity Connectional Conference**, which acknowledges that members are not of one mind regarding biblical interpretations related to human sexuality, in which pastors are allowed but not required to perform same-sex weddings, annual conferences are allowed but not required to ordain those practicing homosexuality, local churches are allowed but not required to receive an LGBT person as pastor, and in which no bishop, pastor, or congregation is compelled to act against conscience in these matters.
- + **Traditional Connectional Conference**, in which marriage shall continue to be defined as between one man and one woman, same-sex weddings are prohibited and clergy performing them shall be disciplined, and those practicing homosexuality cannot be ordained.
- + **Progressive Connectional Conference**, in which same-sex weddings are performed by all clergy, all annual conferences ordain qualified LGBT persons, and all local churches welcome LGBT pastors who match the needs of the congregation and its ministry.

The Connectional Conference Plan also includes the following, among many recommendations:

- Jurisdictional Conferences would have the first level vote regarding Connectional Conference affiliation.

Annual conferences that disagree with the decision of their jurisdiction may decide to affiliate with a different Connectional Conference. Furthermore, the current five U.S. jurisdictions are replaced by the three Connectional Conferences, covering the whole country.

- Local churches may choose to align with a Connectional Conference different from the one decided by their Annual Conference. However, only local churches that choose a connectional conference other than the one chosen by their annual conference would need to make such a vote.
- Central Conferences have the choice of becoming their own Connectional Conference with the same powers as U.S. Connectional Conferences, or have the option of joining a U.S. Connectional Conference
- Connectional Conferences outside the United States may, by majority vote, elect to join one of the Connectional Conferences, in which case the Connectional Conference it joins shall become global.
- General Conference 2024 would be postponed to 2025 to allow time for the transition. This would disconnect succeeding General Conferences from the U.S. election cycle.
- Clergy will choose to affiliate with a Connectional Conference. Some clergy may make themselves available to serve in more than one Connectional Conference. In order to serve in a Connectional Conference, a clergy person will need to agree to meet the qualifications of the Connectional Conference and maintain the standards of conduct as set forth by the Connectional Conference they are serving.
- Each Connectional Conference would create its own *Book of Discipline*, which would begin with The General Book of Discipline, including Articles of Religion, Confessions of Faith, the General Rules and other items that are commonly agreed upon by United Methodists. Each Connectional Conference also has the authority to adapt those items not included in *The General Book of Discipline*.

Faith Matters, November 18, 2018: –REVISED, 2/7/19, per Judicial Council Decision #1366, which found 40% of this plan, as presented originally, in conflict with our UM Constitution

The Traditionalist Plan

In general, the Traditionalist Plan is the most punitive of clergy and bishops regarding the issue of homosexuality. It supports a strict enforcement of Disciplinary language that condemns homosexuality, prohibits the ordination of LGBT folks, and advocates for strong punishment of clergy who bless/ conduct any marriages that are not strictly between a man and a woman. Specifically, it sets the following penalties: one year without pay for a clergy's first conviction if he/she is found guilty of, "conducting ceremonies which celebrate the homosexual unions, or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies." The penalty for a "second offense" shall be, "Not less than termination of conference membership and revocation of credentials of licensing, ordination, or consecration."

Other provisions of the Traditionalist Plan include:

- Broadening the definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual" to include anyone living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union, or who publicly states that he or she is a homosexual.
- Preventing bishops from consecrating, ordaining or commissioning a "self-avowed homosexual" even if that person had been elected or approved by the relevant jurisdictional conference or clergy session.
- Allows for Annual Conferences to become "self-governing Methodist churches" by simple majority vote. This decision may not be changed "within less than four years from a previous vote on the question."
- Allowing local churches in a Conference that plans to enforce the bans to join the "autonomous, affiliated, or concordant" church if they disagree with their conference. Groups of 50 or more churches could form new denominations.

- Requiring the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry to conduct an examination to ascertain whether a candidate was a practicing homosexual, including looking at information on social media.

A “Modified Traditional Plan” has been drafted to address the concerns expressed in Judicial Council Decision 1366. It is among the documents submitted for the 2019 General Conference to consider. However, it has not yet gone before the Judicial Council; and that request may be made if one-fifth of General Conference delegates or a majority of bishops ask the Judicial Council to rule on its constitutionality. Judicial Council members will be present at the General Conference, just in case.