

The Commission on a Way Forward

The Council of Bishops Executive Committee's July 19-20 meeting in Chicago devoted much of its agenda to finalizing plans for launching the Commission on a Way Forward. The full Council had previously referred the design and implementation of the Commission to the Executive Committee.

We began by acknowledging the profound dissonance between what the Council had proposed to the General Conference in May and the reality within the church in July. The landscape has changed dramatically. The reported declarations of non-compliance from several annual conferences, the intention to convene a Wesleyan Covenant Association and the election of the Rev. Karen Oliveto as a bishop of the church have opened deep wounds and fissures within The United Methodist Church and fanned fears of schism.

The church finds itself in an extremely fragile, highly contested season. We lament that, for some, these actions disrupt and detract from the effective ministries of congregations across our global connection. We confess that we have all played a part in delaying God's kingdom reign.

We also affirm that God is steadfast in love and faithfulness, and is with us in all circumstances of our shared journey. We affirm that, as disciples of Jesus, we are all called to maintain unity in the bond of peace. As a Council, we re-affirm our commitment to lead the church in discerning and charting a way forward. We intend to do so with prayerful attention to both urgency and thoughtful preparation. To these ends, the Executive Committee approved a framework for implementing the Commission on a Way Forward.

A purpose statement was adopted for the Commission. The statement is intended to guide the selection of the Commission members and define the scope of the Commission's work. The statement follows:

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. We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God, and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view. We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained; yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration. The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.

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. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.

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. In reflection on the two matters of unity and human sexuality, we will fulfill our directive by considering “new forms and structures” of relationship and through the “complete examination and possible revision” of relevant paragraphs in the Book of Discipline. We will give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present connectionality, which is showing signs of brokenness. If we ignore this work, fracturing will occur in more haphazard and even self-interested ways across the church. If we do this work only to address our preferences and self-interest, we will fail to place our complete trust in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. If we do this work with complete surrender to God’s unlimited imagination and kingdom purposes, we will be blessed beyond our limited human imagination. God remains God; God is with us; God will never let us go. To God be the glory!

The Commission will be composed of 20-25 members to be identified by the end of August. All bishops will be asked to nominate up to five potential members. Names that have already been submitted to the President or the Executive Secretary of the Council will be included in the pool of nominees.

The Executive Committee is targeting October for the first meeting of the Commission. This will ultimately be dependent on coordinating schedules and visas for all Commission members.

The committee began the process toward a called special session of the General Conference in early 2018, and will bring the matter to the full Council for consideration at their meeting in November. Only the full Council could authorize such a session.

A professional facilitator, with proven international and multi-cultural mediation/negotiation skills will be employed by the Council to design and guide the Commission’s discernment process. The search for this facilitator is currently underway.

Bishops Ken Carter, Sandra Steiner Ball and David Yemba have been selected to serve as a moderator team for the Commission. They will preside, provide spiritual guidance and pastoral care.

Beginning now, the Executive Committee will issue regular updates on the Commission’s work every 4-6 weeks.

All bishops, and the entire church, will be invited to continuous prayer for the Commission through a “Praying Our Way Forward” initiative to be launched by the Council in October.

In a related action, the Executive Committee voted to respectfully urge the Judicial Council to place the request from the South Central Jurisdictional Conference regarding the election of Bishop Oliveto on their October 25-28 docket.

The Council of Bishops continues to maintain that the Commission on a Way Forward is the best path for discovering God's vision for our connection. We have a strong bias toward unity, reflected in our consecration vows. We are open to unity being defined in new, innovative ways. We are committed to being a global church, respectful of the contextual realities and complexities that are inherent in such. We are driven by our shared mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are a people of prayer and enjoin the entire church to fervently pray that the Holy Spirit will breakthrough and lead us into a future with hope.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough, President
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