

# The Connectional Conference Plan: A Conversation within the Commission on a Way Forward

## Summarized from the Final Report of the Commission on a Way Forward

*A General Conference 2019 Resource from United Methodist Communications*

**Update:** In early July, the Council of Bishops asked the Judicial Council, the top court in The United Methodist Church, [to rule on the constitutionality of the three plans](#) included in the report of the Commission on the Way Forward. In [Decision 1366](#) on Oct. 25, the Judicial Council unanimously found the One Church Plan to be largely constitutional and found some problems in the Traditional Plan petitions that would need to be addressed before that plan could pass a constitutional test. Since the Connectional Conference Plan contains proposed constitutional changes required for implementation, the court ruled it has no authority to scrutinize the plan at this time. [Read the full UMNS report on the Judicial Council's rulings.](#)

(#) refers to a page in the Report of the Commission on a Way Forward  
All disciplinary references are to *The Book of Discipline 2016*.

### Introduction to the Connectional Conference Plan

In July 2018, the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) [released its final report](#) to the Council of Bishops and the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. The [commission's work](#) seeks to serve and support the discernment of the Council of Bishops (COB) and the decision-making of a special session of the General Conference scheduled for Feb. 23-26, 2019.

The final report includes three plans, each offering The United Methodist Church a distinct way forward around issues of church unity and human sexuality: the One Church Plan (OCP), **the Connectional Conference Plan (CCP)** and Traditional Plan (TP). A majority of the COWF and the COB recommend the OCP to General Conference as the preferred model for a way forward.

### Summary of the Connectional Conference Plan

The Connectional Conference Plan (CCP) values remaining in relationship (unified mission and witness) while respecting different views. It navigates the conflict and theological impasses around LGBTQI marriage and ordination through a restructuring of The UMC's connectional life by replacing jurisdictional conferences in the United States with "connectional conferences."

In the United States, three new values-based connectional conferences (CCs) – progressive, traditional and unity) – will be created to align by convictions and not geography. These three missional "spaces" represent faithful but differing readings of scripture and the culturally specific needs of the contexts they serve. Central conferences can remain in their current configuration (with a new CC name), join one of the new U.S. CCs (making it a global conference) or form new CCs attuned to regional and missional commitments.

### Theological and Biblical Foundations (29-30)

The CCP affirms that **space for contextual ministry and a common mission are possible**. It addresses the present conflict with a strategy for redefining the connection for more effective mission and ministry so all "embody the divine love in the midst of our diversity and disagreement."(30).

With the CCP, each CC **creates its own *Book of Discipline*** to include **shared core convictions/organizational portions** of the *General Book of Discipline* and **adapted sections specific to their context** (e.g., policies on LGBTQ weddings, ordination, credentialing and approved schools/seminaries). They may also create their own “connectional conference judicial courts” with authority to rule based on their specific *Book of Discipline* but subject to appeal to the Judicial Council.

The CCP requires a much longer implementation timeframe than do the other plans, with meetings, analysis, votes and other transition work required between 2019 and 2025. The process begins with voting by jurisdictional conferences (2020) to select CC affiliation (progressive, traditional or unity). ACs that disagree with their jurisdictional conference’s decision can vote to join a different CC. After that, local churches that disagree with their AC’s decision can vote to join another CC. Jurisdictional conferences, ACs and local churches retain all property and liabilities, which follow them to the new CC.

### **Effects of the Connectional Conference Plan (32-36)**

**Local churches** do not have to vote to join one of the three values-based CCs unless they differ from the choice made by their AC to follow/break with the jurisdictional conference decision. Their affiliation binds their ability to set policies related to whether their campus does/does not allow same-gender ceremonies (unless the church or its AC chooses the unity connectional conference). They can re-vote only after four years.

**Annual conferences (AC)** decide by simple majority vote to join another CC *only* if they disagree with the affiliation decision of their jurisdictional or central conference. ACs can only re-vote after four years. Geographical boundary adjustments may require the creation of new ACs. The Transition Team will inform the conference of the impact of its decision. Shared information about pension and other questions will be available. ACs will inform and assist local churches who choose by a simple majority to join another CC. AC-owned property follows it to the new CC (as do jurisdictional conference assets).

**Clergy** must choose to affiliate with a CC, agreeing to meet its qualifications for ordination and standards of conduct. Boards of ordained ministry will communicate expectations and must approve a transfer with the possibility that clergy may serve through more than one connectional conference. CCs recognize each other’s ordinations. Serving in a particular conference is determined by its expectations and qualifications. Each connectional conference sets transitional appointments and security of appointments. Willingness to serve in multiple CCs may affect whether a clergy person receives an appointment. Deacons and licensed local pastors may experience fewer opportunities

**Bishops** must choose a CC. Organizing conferences for CCs in 2022 will elect new bishops. Mandatory retirement ages would be waived during the transition period (2022-2025). Bishops may serve in a different CC during this time. Bishops and cabinets continue to administer appointments.

The CCP changes the function of the Council of Bishops. Colleges of bishops specific to and elected by each new CC will provide for episcopal oversight and accountability. Each U.S. CC

elects and funds its own bishops (episcopal funding by the general church for central conferences continues). The General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA would help establish tax exemption status for each new U.S. CC. Central conferences are authorized to elect bishops and waive mandatory retirement age requirements until 2022.

**Certain boards and agencies** continue their work under the CCP, specifically, Wespath, GCFA, the Publishing House, UMCOR, Archives and History and some parts of the General Board of Global Ministries. A task force with representation from all CCs will evaluate the board and agency structure and propose a new model to be adopted in 2025. Each CC will determine whether to affiliate with the newly configured general agencies.

**Justice ministries** (including but not limited to those focusing on racism and sexism) will be established by each CC with accountability and reporting to General Conference.

**Related institutions** like camps and colleges may choose affiliation with CCs based on their own by-laws.

**Mission field/geography** of the CCP. The plan opens up the entire U.S. to any CC to engage in ministry.

The **Judicial Council** retains authority over constitutional matters with specific CC judicial councils ruling on matters specific to their *CC Book of Discipline* (appeals may still be made to the Judicial Council).

**Central conferences** can either exist as their own renamed CC or align with a U.S. (or other global) CC. They choose their own bishops and continue to receive general church funding for episcopal expenses and mission.

The **financial and pension considerations** of the CCP include legal fees (GCFA will estimate), reconfigured budgets for ACs due to boundary reconfiguration (with additional/fewer churches and clergy), the continuation of Wespath and coverage for all CCs (including legacy pension issues and new plan structures), and transition fallout refiguring the 2020 and 2025 General Conference budgets.

**The 2024 General Conference** would move to 2025 to allow transition time and disconnect later general conferences from U.S. election years. A Transitions Team will assist with changes required by 2025 (organizational conferences, etc.).

#### **Proposed Implementation Plan and Timeline for the CCP**

- **February 2019:** Plan adopted at special session of General Conference
- **March 2019-April 2020:** Voting on constitutional amendments by annual conferences in time for 2020 General Conference (non-voting ACs not included in the aggregate tally)
- **2020**
  - **Constitutional amendments ratified by Council of Bishops**

- **General Conference**
- **Jurisdictional conferences vote** to join one of three CCs
- **Central conferences** become, **join** or form new **global CC** and may elect new bishops (if needed)
- **By August 2021**
  - ACs disagreeing with their jurisdictional conference’s decision vote to join a different CC
  - Bishops align with a CC
- **September 2021:** Bishops and transition team plan CC organizing conferences
- **By July 2022**
  - Local churches disagreeing with their AC choose a different CC affiliation
  - Clergy choose a CC
- **Fall 2022:** Each CC’s organizational conference meets
- **Jan. 1, 2023: Connectional conference structure takes effect**
- **2025:** First **CC meetings** prior to first **General Conference of the new United Methodist Church.**

#### **Disciplinary Changes of the CCP (38-54)**

The CCP concludes with a list of changes to *The Book of Discipline* to be submitted as petitions.

- **Amend ¶101** defining what portions of the *Discipline* are adaptable (for example, sections on homosexuality). It replaces “central conferences” (as having permission to adapt portions of the *Discipline*) with “connectional conferences;” amends the outline of parts of the *BOD* not subject to change. (38-39)
- **Add a new ¶2801** detailing processes and milestone dates for implementing the Connectional Conference plan (39-43)
- **Add a new ¶2802** specifying the formation and work of a Transitions Team with a full-time project manager and other paid staff to help the COB oversee the transition and details for implementing the CCP (43-44)
- **Amend ¶422** redefining the role of the Council of Bishops as a learning community and creating new episcopal supervision structure (“college of bishops”) for each connectional conference (44-45)
- **Amend and replace ¶2602 to include new paragraphs ¶ 602-2606** (with changes to 2608.2) reconfigure the Judicial Council as an elected body of clergy and laity with equal representation from each connectional conference to deal with up to 10 connectional conferences, each with a different *Book of Discipline* (45-46)

#### **Nine Constitutional Amendments Associated with the CCP (46-54)**

- **Amends ¶19 and deletes ¶10** to replace “jurisdictional and central conferences” with renamed “connectional conferences” making it possible to create theologically based connectional conferences (46)
- **Amends ¶14** to move 2024 General Conference to 2025 and shift subsequent assemblies from U.S. election cycles. (46-47)

- **Amends ¶16** to allow connectional conferences to adapt structures and duties of leadership (to their ministry context). (47)
- **Amends ¶19** to allow the episcopacy to be adapted to transregional connectional conferences without expectation of serving in other areas of the church. (48)
- **Amends ¶23** to standardize the powers of jurisdictional and central conferences as “connectional conferences;” requires U.S. connectional conferences to financially support their own bishops; allow all connectional conferences freedom to adapt *The Book of Discipline* and create judicial structures to review legal questions specific to it (48-49)
- **Amends ¶37** to establish three connectional conferences in the U.S. disconnected from specific geography (states and landscape borders) (49-51)
- **Amends ¶45** to reconfigure the Council of Bishops as an ecumenical, missional, general church vitality resource while creating Connectional Colleges of Bishops with authority, tenure and power shaped by each connectional conference (51-53)
- **Amends ¶ 56.3** to allow connectional conference judicial courts to rule on matters related to issues covered by the adapted portions of their specific *Book of Discipline* (allows appeal to the general church Judicial Council for final ruling). (53)
- **Add name changes in ¶¶32-36, 56 and 61** to replace “jurisdiction,” “jurisdictional conference” and “central conference” with “connectional conference” and replace “of the central conferences” with “outside the United States.”(53-54)

*--This summary was developed from the report of the Commission on a Way Forward by David C. Teel, freelance writer and editor based in Nashville, Tennessee and former academic editor at Abingdon Press.*