

The Traditional Plan: A Conversation within the Council of Bishops

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 Traditional Plan (TP)

In July 2018, the Commission on a Way Forward [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 and the decision-making work 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 One Church Plan to General Conference as the preferred model for a way forward.

About the Traditional Plan

Included as Appendix 3 of the COWF [Final Report](#) (63-84), the **TP** is the work of “a few members of the Council of Bishops” (COB) and not the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF). In its November 2017 presentation to COB, COWF reported on its conversation around three plans. At that time, the bishops encouraged COWF to continue work only on the OCP and the CCP. The report COWF presented to the COB in May 2018 included the details of those plans. As COWF had completed its work, a small group of bishops then developed the detailed **TP** that is included in the appendix and summarized here.

The **TP** seeks to support the decision-making work of General Conference in 2019. It also promises ways to navigate theological impasses around same-gender marriage and LGBTQI ordination while fulfilling the missional and contextual needs of a global church.

Summary of the Traditional Plan

Managing difference and diversity around human sexuality **through accountability, certification and intentional, “gracious” division**, the TP respects differing theological understandings by “giving each a space” (63) through new ways of being in relationship.

The **TP** reflects a commitment to:

- (1) disciplinary **accountability**, clear **consequences** and enforced **penalties** for violating proposed broadened language on human sexuality in *The Book of Discipline* (BOD);
- (2) **missional unity and alignment** with the global church's stance on human sexuality without the distraction of trials and conflict resolution processes;
- (3) an approach to **contextuality** that resolves the impasse over differing views of faithfulness related to human sexuality with **intentional and strategic division into separate Wesleyan denominations**.

Calling for greater accountability from bishops, clergy, credentialing bodies and conferences, the Traditional Plan promises space, freedom, flexibility and missional vitality by reinforcing the current definition of marriage and global United Methodist teaching on human sexuality. It offers greater contextuality through "one unified moral stance on the issues of marriage and sexuality." (63). The TP respects "different theological understandings" by redefining our current connectional life, creating separate spaces for authentic, contextual ministry with people with differing views (63).

The TP broadens the definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" and provides for stipulated, "gracious" separation for those who cannot conform and be accountable to revised disciplinary language defining human sexuality and the qualifying rules governing the candidacy and ordination of clergy. It offers an extensive new plan (proposed ¶12801 "Implementing Gracious Accountability") for the creation of self-governing churches outside The United Methodist Church with a "new connectional status" and autonomy to engage in contextualized ministry with LGBTQI people – people who are also welcome to remain, worship and become members of The UMC.

Theological and Biblical Foundations of the Traditional Plan and Our Mission (64)

The TP takes seriously the need for "greater contextualization" of mission and suggests that division, departure and the "formation of a new Wesleyan denomination" present "an opportunity for a different type of unity...for the sake of mission." Parting ways on the issue of human sexuality is a fitting response to the missional and contextual needs of our time: "It is appropriate for there to be **two different Wesleyan bodies** who teach differently" on same-gender marriage.

The TP promises to **free progressives** to pursue a fully inclusive version of Methodism to best reach people of all gender identities while **assuring** that **traditional United Methodists** can continue to be in mission and ministry with those valuing "traditional teaching" on marriage and sexuality.

The Effects of the Traditional Plan

The TP spells out the impact of its recommended changes to the *Discipline* for local churches, clergy, annual conferences, the COB, general agencies, United Methodist-related institutions, the broader mission field and the global church. It recognizes some financial impact, with little change to accumulated pension commitments. It also offers a specific timeline for recommended full implementation by the end of 2020.

A congregation does not have to vote. However, if its annual conference votes to stay in The UMC, it may **vote to join a new self-governing church**. A local church may revote every four years. If its annual conference votes to leave The UMC, a congregation **may vote** any time within the first two years **to remain in The UMC**. Departing churches keep all property, assets and liabilities but must pay their share of the conference's unfunded pension liability upon departure.

The TP requires remaining **clergy** to uphold and support the revised requirements of the *Discipline* on ordination and same-gender marriage. Those who cannot do so are encouraged to request transfer to a new self-governing church. They keep their accumulated pension up to the time of departure. Clergy choosing to remain United Methodist who violate the revised policies will be subject to revised disciplinary processes to adjudicate complaints (first offense: one-year suspension without pay and commitment not to repeat; second offense: termination of conference membership and revocation of credentials).

Annual conferences must vote on one of two statements to indicate they will or will not abide by the new disciplinary requirements on human sexuality. Those that cannot will form or join a self-governing church allowing ordination of LGBTQI people and same-gender marriage. **Jurisdictional and central conferences** remain the same unless annual conferences vote to leave. UMC boundaries may be adjusted and remaining bishops must certify support for new disciplinary requirements.

General boards and agencies continue their work. **Related institutions** (camps, colleges) can continue their affiliations or adapt based on the *BOD* and their own by-laws.

The **Council of Bishops** continues. All **bishops** must support new definitions and procedures, including a new Council Relations Committee. The **global church** continues to be treated the same. With no significant change in global church funding, the TP acknowledges departing churches will create an impact.

The TP – if **approved** by General Conference in February 2019 – includes several milestone dates for disciplinary compliance:

- Before March 31, 2020: **Annual conferences vote** on two statements in proposed ¶2801 indicating they will or will not “support, uphold, maintain accountability” to revised disciplinary standards.
- March/April 2020: **Local churches** and **clergy** decide to remain or join a self-governing church.
- By June 30, 2020: **Bishops** must certify one of two statements in ¶2801 saying they will or cannot “uphold United Methodist standards on marriage and sexuality in their entirety.”
- Jan. 1, 2021: The General Council on Finance and Administration no longer sends or receives funds from annual conferences voting not to support revised disciplinary language of the TP.

Disciplinary Changes of the Traditional Plan (68-84)

The TP concludes with **17 sections** offering additions and changes to the *Book of Discipline* that have been submitted as petitions to the special session of General Conference.

Section #1 broadens the *Discipline's* definition in ¶304.3 of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” to include other ways individuals acknowledge engagement in homosexual practices (adding “or is living in a same-sex marriage, partnership or civil union, or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual”). Public records or declarations in public forums, including social media, can be sources of this determination.

Sections #2, #3, and #4 seek to establish **greater accountability for bishops** by creating **two new committees** to monitor consistent and fair processes for placing a bishop on involuntary

leave/retirement. Bishops are accountable to a new COB **Council Relations Committee** (CRC) that responds to and presides over requests for involuntary leave/retirement proceedings. An **Administrative Review Committee** guarantees fair processes. The COB may affirm or reverse the CRC's decision. These sections amend by adding to ¶¶408.3c, 410.5 and 422.2 and add ¶¶422.5 and 422.6.

Sections #5 and #6 seek **greater episcopal accountability** in consecrating bishops, commissioning and ordaining clergy and nominating board of ordained ministry (BOM) members to guard against “non-conforming” boards of ordained ministry. It amends ¶¶416.6 and 635.1.a to **prohibit bishops from consecrating** bishops and/or **commissioning** and **ordaining** deacons and elders if they are **self-avowed practicing homosexuals** under the new ¶304.3. The prohibition applies either if the BOM has made a determination using the new mandated certification process or if it has “failed to certify it carried out the disciplinarily mandated examination.” Recommendation by the BOM and Clergy Session approval will not excuse bishops who ordain these candidates. **BOM nominees** must “**certify** that [they] will uphold, enforce and maintain *The Book of Discipline* related to commissioning, ordination and marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” Bishops must certify that BOM nominees have certified they will uphold the *BOD* on these issues. (70-71)

Sections #7, #8 and #9 also seek to guard against “non-conforming boards of ordained ministry” by amending ¶¶632.2h, 806.9, and 613.19 to require BOMs to certify examination of candidates and annual conferences to certify a bishop's BOM nominees. Changes to ¶632.2.h require the BOM to certify and share results of their efforts to determine an individual's fitness for ministry and if a candidate is a “practicing homosexual” (including review of social media). Section #8 and #9 amend ¶¶806.9 and 613.19 by adding that **annual conferences** will “certify” the bishop's nominated BOM members will “uphold, enforce and maintain” the BOD around ordination and marriage (of “practicing homosexuals”). (71-72)

Section #10 adds a new ¶2801 – *Implementing “Gracious Accountability”* – with a **detailed exit strategy** for **annual conferences (72)**, **bishops (73)**, **clergy** and **churches (75ff)** who cannot certify they will uphold, enforce and hold others accountable to the expanded requirements of the *BOD* “forbidding same sex weddings and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” It **requires annual conferences** (by March 31, 2020) and **bishops** (by June 30, 2020) to **vote** on or **certify one of two statements** indicating they will/will not “support, uphold, and maintain accountability” as the condition for remaining in The United Methodist Church or beginning a separation/exiting process to form new “self-governing churches.” It stipulates financial obligations, use of the United Methodist name and logo and participation in UM-affiliated organizations by self-governing churches. It also addresses ongoing relationships between UM-affiliated institutions and self-governing churches. It offers annual conferences and local churches outside the United States a one-time 12-month extension on the voting process. (72-78)

Section #11 amends the “Power of Trial Court Penalties” section of ¶2711.3 by creating minimum penalties for clergy: first offense, year's suspension without pay; second offense, conference membership termination with credentials revoked. (78)

Section #12 amends ¶304.5 to prevent district committees and conference boards of ordained ministry from recommending unqualified candidates to the clergy session. It requires bishops to rule such recommendations ineligible for action.

Section #13 amends the process in ¶¶362.1e and 413.3d to limit a bishop's ability to dismiss complaints by adding new restrictive language. The cabinet/bishops must provide reasons for dismissal in writing copied and given to complainant. (79).

Section #14 and #15 amends the "Just Resolution" complaints procedures (¶¶362.1, 413.3c, 2701.5, 2706.5.c.3) by adding language stating "all identified harms," naming how the church or others will address it and requiring clergy "commitment not to repeat the offense." (80) This calls for amending the "Just Resolution" process to mandate the inclusion of the complainant in same paragraphs: "the complainant(s) shall be party to the resolution process and every effort shall be made to have the complainant(s) agree to the resolution before it may take effect." (81-83)

Section #16 amends ¶2715.10 to allow church complainants to appeal beyond the committee on appeals to the Judicial Council, which "levels the playing field" for complainants and "enables the church to correct errors in the trial process that prejudice the results of the trial." It introduces "of fact" language to sections dealing with the church having no right of appeal, adding "shall have a right of appeal to the committee on appeals and then to the Judicial Council...based on egregious errors of Church law or administration." This includes appeals to both jurisdictional and central conference committees on appeal and "then to the Judicial Council" It gives the committees an option to "remand the case for a new trial." (83)

Section #17 amends ¶¶570 and 574.1 "to create the option of concordat churches in the United States." It adds language allowing "churches formed through the provisions of ¶2801," including self-governing churches, to enter into agreements with The UMC, permitting a "continuing connection with those congregations departing from the denomination because of conscience." (84)

--Summary developed by David C. Teel, freelance writer and editor based in Nashville, Tennessee, and former academic books editor for Abingdon Press, an imprint of the United Methodist Publishing House.