

An Annual Conference Primer: Information for BWC clergy and lay members

Welcome! We are so glad you're going to be participating in the annual session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, held May 27-29 at the Hilton Hotel in Baltimore. This is the 242nd time this gathering of Methodists has been held. Our theme this year, "Rooted in Christ: Love Boldly," is laying the groundwork for a meaningful and memorable session.

If you're new to the ministry of the Annual Conference, it can feel like there are a lot of moving parts. The annual conference was created in the early days of Methodism to strengthen and multiply faith communities and extend our spiritual witness. We offer this primer to inspire and equip you in your work to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. If you have any questions, contact communications@bwcumc.org.



THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The annual conference is known throughout the denomination as "the basic body of the church." According to the United Methodist Book of Discipline, this geographic body exists to "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God."

Each year, an equal number of clergy members and lay members attend their conference's annual sessions for worship, fellowship, and to conduct the business of the conference, which typically lasts three or four days. These sessions include reports of past and ongoing work; adoption of future goals, programs and budgets; the commissioning and ordination of clergy members as Deacons and Elders; and more. A resident bishop presides over these meetings.

The Baltimore-Washington Conference, in the Northeastern Jurisdiction, is made up of 559 churches in Washington, D.C., much of Maryland, and the panhandle of West Virginia. The Conference's 889 clergy and 114,489 lay members, led by [Bishop LaTrelle Easterling](#), live out their faith, certain of the vision that "transformed lives transform lives." Each Sunday, more than 70,744 United Methodists gather in this region for worship. Throughout the week, these people participate in ministries that focus on young people, advocacy and action, wellness and missions, leadership development and new expressions of faith.

Bishop LaTrelle Easterling also presides over the [Peninsula-Delaware Conference](#), which has about 284 churches. The bishop was assigned to lead both conferences in 2021 and the relationship was formalized into the [Baltimore-Washington and Peninsula-Delaware Area](#) at the 2024 Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference. The Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference session will be May 12-14 in Ocean City, Maryland.

The Baltimore-Washington Conference offices are located at 11711 East Market Place in Fulton, in the Maple Lawn community of Howard County. The [Conference staff](#) includes the bishop; six district superintendents, three district administrators; several program or discipleship staff; and financial/operations and communications staff. Altogether, there are about 50 people on the conference staff.

As of July 1, 2025, the Baltimore-Washington Conference moved from eight to [six geographic districts](#), led by conference superintendents. They include:

Harbor District – [Rev. Sarah Schleickert](#)
Two Rivers District – [Rev. Johnsie Cogman](#)
Lakes District – [Rev. Jim Miller](#)
Canal District – [Rev. John Wunderlich](#)
Reservoir District – [Rev. Eliezer Valentín-Castañón](#)
Tidal Basin District – [lanther Mills](#)

Each local church and charge belongs to a district and to a [Hub](#).

Most churches or charges (two or more churches with one pastor) are presided over by either an ordained Elder or a provisional Elder. Increasingly, many smaller congregations are served by licensed local pastors.

WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF ANNUAL CONFERENCE?

All clergy (Elders and Deacons and local pastors under appointment) hold their membership in the Annual Conference, not in a local church.

To be a voting member, a lay person must be elected by his or her local church through a nomination and voting process that is held at the annual Church Conference. At-large members

are also named to assure there are equal numbers of laity and clergy, as required by the Book of Discipline.

The Church Conference is to the local church what the Annual Conference Session is to the Conference; i.e., the annual business meeting. Church Conferences may happen more often, but they must happen at least once a year, under the rules of the Book of Discipline. A district superintendent or her/his designee presides.



242nd SESSION OF THE BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON CONFERENCE - 2026

The theme of this session is “Rooted in Christ: Love Boldly.” Our guiding Scripture is Ephesians 3: 16-19. launches an Area-wide theme that will guide us through the next three years:

- 2026 – Rooted in Christ: Love Boldly
- 2027 – Rooted in Christ: Serve Joyfully
- 2028 – Rooted in Christ: Lead Courageously

This unfolding theme is rooted in and shaped by the new [United Methodist Church Vision Statement](#), which calls us to form disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, *love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously* in local communities and worldwide connections.

The Annual Conference Session is presided over by Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, who is the legal president of the Annual Conference. Other officers include the Conference Secretary (Kevin Silberzahn), elected for a four-year term at the beginning of the quadrennium; the Conference Treasurer (Paul Eichelberger); the Conference Lay Leader (Amelia Duroska) and the Chancellor (Thomas Starnes).

Under our rules, during debate, the bishop recognizes each person asking to speak, and allows three minutes, with no more than three speakers allowed to speak for, or three persons allowed to speak against, a motion or amendment.

One of the key missional priorities of the Baltimore-Washington Conference is to have 100 percent of its churches serving with 100 vitality. Vitality is defined by four dimensions: seeing all the people, deepening discipleship, living and loving like Jesus and multiplying impact. We are loved by God and are living out that love in ways that create vitality and abundant life. Our response to God's love transforms us into engaged disciples, making a difference in the communities in which we live and serve. [Learn more.](#)



WHAT IS THE BUSINESS OF ANNUAL CONFERENCE SESSION?

This year, members will be called upon to vote on several items, including the proposed 2027 annual budget and any resolutions to be considered, which are outlined on the [Annual Conference Session webpage](#).

Annual Conference also includes many opportunities for inspirational worship, reports from the Discipleship and Stewardship areas of the conference; a memorial service recognizing those clergy, clergy spouses and lay members to annual conference who died in the previous 12

months; recognition of clergy who are retiring; and the Ordination and Commissioning service. In addition, there are celebrations of various kinds, Bible studies and times of fellowship.

In their decision-making and actions, United Methodists follow the lead of Methodism's founder, John Wesley, believed that "the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience and confirmed by reason." Asserting the primacy of Scripture, United Methodists still embrace Wesley's quadrilateral of the Scripture, tradition, personal experience and reason. They recognize that the quadrilateral allows people to come to different decisions on some issues and often celebrate a diversity of thought. But they also covenant together around a sacred and shared inheritance and a common desire to participate in the creative and redemptive activity of God.



WHO CAN VOTE AND HOW DO I VOTE?

Eligible members will register to attend the Annual Conference Session. They will be given a name tag and a voting card that has a color-coded ribbon attached according to various categories. Lay Members to Annual Conference have white ribbons. A reserve lay member has a green ribbon. Full clergy members, both Elders and Deacons, have blue ribbons. Probationary members, local pastors, retired local pastors and affiliate clergy (those from other denominations) have yellow ribbons. Anyone with a red ribbon is staff.

Early in the conference schedule, the bishop declares the boundaries of "the bar." People who are not allowed to vote, i.e. guests and friends, and a few others, must sit "outside the bar." To be eligible and able to vote, you must sit "inside the bar." Marshalls and ushers monitor the doors carefully and direct people, according to the color of their badge ribbon, to the proper sections. Elected lay members vote. Clergy vote. Guests do not.

Any voter may speak from the floor to a motion, but no one person may speak more than twice on any given motion. The bishop controls who speaks, establishing that there can be three for and three against the motion before debate is cut off. Robert's Rules of Order are followed.

Reserve members, elected by each church, can only vote when they are substituting for the Lay Member and have officially been recognized by the Conference Secretary. Reserves may attend to hear the debate and procedures but may not vote.

Someone speaking to a motion is asked to give his or her name and their church before beginning to speak to only one issue. If proposing an amendment, the speaker is asked to write out a statement and give a copy to the secretary, who is sitting in the front of the ballroom to assure that the words are recorded properly. The bishop tries to honor all sections of the room and to not let any person or group dominate the discussion.

Any member may “move the question,” which takes precedence over and closes any debate going on. It requires two-thirds agreement. The Annual Conference Session follows its own “Rules of the Session.” In any parliamentary situation not clearly covered by the Rules of the Session, the Conference is governed in its actions by the current edition of Robert’s Rules of Order.

If you have any questions, refer to the [Rules of the Session](#).



SPEAKING UNITED METHODIST

Here is a list of “jargon,” words that many United Methodists use without thinking, but with which someone new to the process might have trouble. It’s in alphabetical order for easy reference.

Mission Shares and benevolence factor: Because we are a connectional church, every congregation is expected to pay its Mission Shares (officially known in the Book of Discipline as apportionments), the share of the overall expenses of running a large denomination, jurisdiction, annual conference and district. [Mission Shares](#) financially underwrite United Methodist ministry and mission beyond the local church. The amount for each church is reached by a specific formula, called the benevolence factor. In 2025, the benevolence factor is 17.40 percent of the local church's operating budget. Expenses a church has for building construction or to support missions is not counted as part of the operating budget. By operating on a percentage basis, smaller churches pay fewer dollars than larger churches.

The Book of Discipline, or simply the Discipline: This is the official manual of procedures and regulations. It covers every aspect of church life, doctrine, guidance for Christian behavior, procedures for becoming a church member or minister, protocols for organizing and administering local churches, annual conferences, districts and church-wide boards and agencies, as well as rules of church law. It is revised every four years at General Conference.

Book of Resolutions: This book explains the many social and justice ministries' actions that The United Methodist Church believes in, teaches, and practices. It contains all resolutions or pronouncements on issues approved by the General Conference and currently valid. United Methodists believe in personal and social holiness. Our witness is outlined in our [Social Principles](#).

Cabinet: The Appointive Cabinet includes the bishop, the Area's chief administrative officer, and six district superintendents. In addition, the Extended Cabinet includes the Director of Connectional Ministries, the Treasurer, the Director of Communications, Chief Administrative Officer, the Director of Congregational Vitality, the Lay Leader, the Assistant to the Bishop and the Director of Business Systems.

Central Conference: This refers to the geographic areas in Africa, Europe and the Philippines, each composed of annual conferences. Our ministry partners in Zimbabwe, Korea, and Eurasia are each part of the Central Conferences. We are also partners with Methodist churches in Puerto Rico.

Charge Conference: The basic policy-making body of the local church. It reviews the congregation's ministries, endorses candidates for ministry and sets clergy compensation. In the BWC we hold Church Conferences, which allow all church members to attend and vote.

Connectional: You often hear this word used, as in "We're a connectional church." It's unique to The United Methodist Church and simply means all United Methodist leaders and congregations throughout the world are connected by certain loyalties and commitments that call us to live in covenantal accountability. Through their churches, districts, annual, jurisdictional and general conferences United Methodists join in a connectional system that enables the whole of the church to be much more faithful and effective than the sum of its parts. Connectionalism creates a vital web of interactive relationships throughout the world.

Connectional Table: This is a Baltimore-Washington Conference program body that discusses the budget, resolutions and recommendations to come before the Annual Conference Session. It is composed of both clergy and laity and has representation from every conference committee or commission.

Deacon: A person ordained to a lifetime ministry of Word and service to community and congregation. Deacons are not part of the itinerant system, which appoints pastors to churches; they find their own positions that are then approved by the bishop. They, along with the Elders, are ordained at Annual Conference. After ordination, they carry the title “Reverend.” As of January 1, 2025, Deacons may [offer communion and conduct baptisms](#) in their context.

District: Regional group of churches or charges, supervised by a district superintendent. The BWC has [six district superintendents](#), who are appointed by the bishop to administer the work of the church within a particular geographic area.

Elder: A person ordained to a lifetime ministry of service, Word, sacrament and order. They are authorized to administer the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion and to order the church for mission and ministry. After ordination, they are referred to as “Reverend.”

Itineracy: The system of The United Methodist Church by which pastors are [appointed to their charges](#) by the bishops unlike some other denominations where a pastor is “called.” Pastors are under obligation to serve where appointed.



Local Pastor: A licensed pastor, annually approved by the District Committee on Ordained Ministry, who is authorized to perform all duties of an ordained minister while assigned to a particular church or charge under the supervision of a district superintendent.

Provisional Elder or Deacon: In the process toward ordination for either Deacons or Elders, there is a three-year period that is somewhat like an internship. He or she serves in a church as its leader or in an associate position, studies, takes tests and develops their spiritual life. After successfully completing the time, the person can be ordained. The term has changed from “probationary” to “provisional,” but the old name sometimes still lingers.

Social Principles: A document setting forth the basic position of The United Methodist Church on important social issues. Each General Conference reviews the [Social Principles](#), makes changes, and reissues them in full in the Book of Discipline.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You’ll find all staff friendly and willing to help; if the person you ask doesn’t have the answer, they can probably point to someone who does. Here are some specific ones to contact:

Business office: With questions of membership and who can vote, or questions of payments, go to the business office.

Ushers and marshals: The ushers and marshals can help with questions dealing with the seating in the ballroom, who can vote, etc.

Communications and press office: For questions dealing with the public, the videos being seen, and news of the session, go to the communications office.

Website: The conference website is www.bwcumc.org. A summary of the actions of annual conference will be posted on the website to assist you in reporting to your local church. As a leader in the conference, you want to also subscribe to the e-connection, a weekly electronic newsletter, which provides timely news and information about the church. You can [subscribe online](#).



INFORMATION ON THE GENERAL CHURCH

Methodism can trace its roots back to the 1730s to Oxford University in England where Charles Wesley and his Holiness Club were taunted for their “methodical” approach to faith. But there was a madness to their method, which launched a movement that grew into today’s worldwide 10 million-member United Methodist Church.

The denomination began in 1785, just after Christmas, in Baltimore, when Bishops Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke “called all the preachers together” and 60 pastors met at Lovely Lane meeting house to organize a church that would shape the identity of a new nation.

Like any living organism, over the years the church has grown and divided. The various flavors of the Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Protestant, African American Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal Church South, Evangelical United Brethren and other traditions united a group of people. who in 1968 became The United Methodist Church.

Although there is no exclusive United Methodist doctrine, United Methodists generally proclaim:

- the availability of God’s grace for all;
- the essential unity of faith and works; and
- the importance of seeking holiness of heart and life for both individuals and society.

Within [The United Methodist Church](#) there is no single central office, no archbishop and no pope. The governance of denomination follows a system similar to the United States with a legislative, executive and judicial branches.

The General Conference: The [United Methodist General Conference](#) is the only body that speaks for the denomination. It meets every four years, with no fewer than 600, nor more than 1,000 delegates. Its last regularly scheduled meeting was in 2024 in Charlotte, N.C.



At the General Conference session, delegates from all over the world vote on many items which then amend and add to the [Book of Discipline](#) and the Book of Resolutions. The General Conference might be compared to the legislative branch of the U.S. government. The General Conference is the only official voice of The United Methodist Church. Though bishops preside over the General Conference, they have no vote.

Working with the General Conference is the Council of Bishops, active and retired bishops from all over the world, who meet somewhat like the executive branch of the U.S. government. They elect their own leader each quadrennium. The head of the Council of Bishops at present is [Bishop Tracey Smith Malone](#), who serves the Indiana Conference.

As the denomination's "Supreme Court," a nine-member [Judicial Council](#) composed of both laity and clergy, interprets church law and determines constitutionality of proceedings at all

levels of church life. It usually meets twice a year in the spring and fall to consider whether actions of various church bodies adhere to the constitution and Book of Discipline.

The next largest body is the **Jurisdictional Conference**. Within the United States, there are 21,176 churches that belong to five jurisdictions in the United States: Northeastern, North Central, Southeastern, South Central and Western. The Baltimore-Washington Conference is one of 10 conferences that belong to the [Northeastern Jurisdiction](#). The Jurisdictional Conference meets every four years following the General Conference; its primary function is to elect bishops. It also conducts business of interest to the whole region, such as mergers or affiliations of Conferences. The last Jurisdictional Conference was held in 2024 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The United Methodist Church has several General agencies, which equip local churches throughout the denomination. The [General Board of Church and Society](#), which advocates for the United Methodist stance on social issues at the U.S. Capitol, and the [General Commission on Religion and Race](#) are headquartered in the Methodist Building at 100 Maryland Ave, NW, in Washington, D.C., where the bishop also has an office.