A Summary of the Three Proposals from the Commission on a Way Forward

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“I will be sharing the elements involved in each plan [provided by the Commission on a Way Forward]…. I will not be sharing the actual legislation or [all] the details of the report, …”

The One Church Plan

The One Church Plan is the proposal with the most amount of information that has been publicly released. It is based on the idea that the church’s teaching regarding the practice of homosexuality and gender identity is a non-essential issue. Proponents of the One Church Plan believe that Christians can disagree about these issues and even have different practices and still work together within one church.

Key elements of the One Church Plan:

- The plan states that we are not of one mind regarding human sexuality and affirms “those who continue to maintain that the Scriptural witness does not condone the practice of homosexuality,” as well as “those who believe the witness of Scripture calls us to reconsider the teaching of the church with respect to monogamous homosexual relationships.”
- The definition of marriage is changed from “one man and one woman” to “two adults.”
- The plan deletes the language, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”
- NOTE: the above three changes apply to the whole church and are not adaptable by the central conferences outside the United States.
- The plan deletes the requirement that ordained clergy not be self-avowed practicing homosexuals, allowing each annual conference board of ordained ministry and clergy session to determine how standards relating to human sexuality would apply to candidates for ordination. Those who are ordained clergy must be appointed by the bishop to serve.
- The plan states that ordained deacons and elders, as well as licensed local pastors, are not required or compelled to perform any marriage, union, or blessing of same-sex couples, nor are they prohibited from doing so. The decision about whether to participate in performing a same-sex wedding or blessing would strictly be up to the individual clergyperson.
- The plan provides that clergy who cannot continue to serve in their annual conference due to disagreement with the conference’s standards for ordination around human sexuality may transfer to a different annual conference. It also provides that clergy who
cannot continue to serve a given local church due to disagreements over same-sex marriage should be reassigned to a different church.

- The plan forbids clergy from performing a same-sex wedding on church property unless the church has approved the use of church property for that purpose by a majority vote of the church conference.
- The plan allows that no bishop is required to license, commission, or ordain any person who is a self-avowed practicing homosexual, but that another bishop should be brought in to provide these services. The bishop is, however, required to appoint any person who is a self-avowed practicing homosexual and is ordained.
- The plan forbids bishops and district superintendents from either requiring or prohibiting pastors from performing same-sex weddings or unions. It also forbids them from either requiring or prohibiting local churches from holding same-sex weddings on church property. It forbids superintendents (but not bishops) from coercing, threatening, or retaliating against any pastor for either performing or refusing to perform a same-sex wedding.
- The plan allows an annual conference clergy session to adopt a policy regarding what standards to apply to candidates for ministry regarding human sexuality.
- The plan deletes from the chargeable offenses against clergy being a self-avowed practicing homosexual or performing a same-sex wedding.
- The plan gives central conferences outside the United States 18 months to decide whether or not to accept the above proposals or continue with the current *Book of Discipline*.
- The plan requires any local church leaving the denomination to pay its share of the annual conference’s unfunded pension liabilities, but it does not include any additional provisions for local churches to leave the denomination and keep their property. Whether or not the local church can keep its property is still left up to each bishop and each annual conference.
- The plan provides that any clergy who leave the denomination would have their pension benefits converted from a defined benefit to a defined contribution plan. This means that the amount of future benefits is not guaranteed, but that the amount of benefits would depend upon how much money is in the person’s pension account at the time of retirement.

### Summary

What does this plan actually do?

- It changes the church’s official teaching on marriage and sexuality to affirm monogamous same-sex relationships. This is a change that affects all United Methodists everywhere, even if we disagree.
- It delegates to each annual conference the decision about what standards to impose on clergy regarding same-sex practices. Importantly, laity will have no voice in this decision; it will be strictly a decision of the annual conference clergy.
- It allows pastors to perform same-sex weddings if they want to without any repercussions.
- It delegates to each local church the decision of whether or not to allow same-sex weddings to be performed on church property.
• It includes protections of conscience and forbids bishops and district superintendents from coercing or punishing clergy who disagree with them about same-sex weddings.
• It protects bishops from having to license, commission, or ordain someone whom they believe does not meet the qualifications for ministry, but it gets around that by bringing in another bishop who is willing to do so. And it does not protect bishops from having to appoint someone as clergy whom they believe does not meet the qualifications for ministry.
• It allows central conferences outside the United States to continue operating under the current provisions of the Discipline, but the whole church would affirm monogamous same-sex marriage.
• It changes the church’s pension plan to accommodate clergy and congregations that might leave the denomination, but it provides no mechanism for congregations to leave with their property.

Implications

There are many issues that this plan raises for evangelicals and traditionalists. A few of them are:

• It changes the church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality to endorse conduct that Scripture prohibits. Such a change not only violates our consciences, it very well could remove the religious liberty legal protection that pastors and congregations have relied upon in not performing same sex weddings. While United Methodist clergy currently may point to the church’s official teaching as a basis for not marrying same-sex couples or hiring practicing homosexuals in our churches, that would no longer be the case under the One Church Plan.
• It officially allows practices in parts of the church that the Bible calls sin.
• It takes the conflict over the practice of homosexuality from the general church level down to every annual conference and every local church, as each makes its own decision about whether to allow same-sex marriage and the practice of homosexuality. This will multiply the level of conflict in our denomination, rather than resolve it.
• It sets up a situation where one annual conference will have different teachings and practices than another, and where two local United Methodist churches in the same community could have diametrically opposite teachings and practices on marriage and sexuality. This will cause confusion and lead to the further weakening of the United Methodist “brand.” What it means to be “United Methodist” will depend upon what local church one attends. There will be a much weaker connectional identity for the denomination.
• Many evangelicals will seek to leave the denomination if the One Church Plan passes because for most of us, adhering to Scriptural teaching on sexuality is an essential issue, but there is no orderly mechanism for congregations to do so and keep their property. This is a recipe for widespread lawsuits over property that consume the church’s resources meant to be spent on mission.
• Many progressives will not be satisfied with this compromise and will continue to push for the full affirmation of same-sex relationships to be required in every annual conference and local church. The conflict will continue.
There is no easy or painless way out of the impasse that besets our church, and there is no perfect solution. Of the three plans, however, the One Church Plan seems to be the least faithful to Scripture and the least able to practically resolve the impasse. It will not accomplish what the General Conference intended in providing a way forward that resolves the conflict in our church.

**The Traditional Plan**

The Traditional Plan retains the current stance in the *Book of Discipline* that values all persons as equally “of sacred worth, created in the image of God” and believes that the practice of homosexuality is contrary to God’s will. Because of widespread disobedience to the church’s prohibition of same-sex weddings and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals, the Traditional Plan dramatically enhances accountability to the church’s requirements and closes many of the loopholes currently being used to avoid accountability. At the same time, the Plan offers a gracious exit for annual conferences, congregations, bishops, and clergy who cannot in good conscience abide by the church’s historic standards.

**Key features of the Traditional Plan include:**

- The requirement that every annual conference vote on whether or not it is prepared to fully uphold and enforce the standards of the church around same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals. Those annual conferences unwilling or unable to enforce the *Discipline* are encouraged to withdraw from The United Methodist Church and form a self-governing Methodist church that would allow same-sex marriage and LGBT ordination.
- Annual conferences that did not agree to enforce the *Discipline* or who failed to do so would, as of January 1, 2021, no longer be able to use the United Methodist name or logo, and would be unable to give or receive funds through the general church.
- Any annual conference could, by a simple majority, vote to withdraw from The United Methodist Church and keep its assets and liabilities. The annual conference would still be responsible for its pension liabilities and could continue to sponsor a pension program through Wespath.
- Any local church in a departing annual conference could vote by a simple majority to remain in The United Methodist Church and abide by the current provisions of the *Discipline*.
- Every bishop would be required to submit a statement as to whether or not he or she is prepared to fully uphold and enforce the standards of the church around same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and to hold those under their supervision accountable to those standards. Any bishop unwilling or unable to do so would be subject to a disciplinary process administered by the Council of Bishops.
- The Council of Bishops would establish a committee to respond to bishops who are unwilling to enforce the *Discipline* or who are charged with the offenses of immorality or practices incompatible with Christian teaching. Upon the committee’s recommendation, the Council of Bishops could vote to place a bishop on involuntary leave or involuntary retirement.
• Any group of 50 or more local congregations could vote to withdraw from The United Methodist Church to form a self-governing Methodist church, upon payment of each local church’s share of their annual conference’s unfunded pension liability.
• Any local church that wants to allow same-sex marriage, but is in an annual conference that will continue to prohibit such under the current Discipline, could vote by a 55 percent majority to withdraw from The United Methodist Church to join a self-governing Methodist church that allows same-sex marriage. The local church would have to pay its share of their annual conference’s unfunded pension liabilities.
• Bishops and clergy who are unable to live within the boundaries of conduct established by the Discipline would be encouraged to transfer to a self-governing Methodist church that affirms their beliefs.
• Annual conferences and congregations that depart from The United Methodist Church could continue to participate in Wespath and could negotiate fee-based services from other general boards and agencies of the UM Church. They could also continue to participate in joint mission through the General Board of Global Ministries, as well as partnerships for mission and other joint projects, with the agreement of the UM entity involved. Changes would be made to the pension program to ensure that pension liabilities are fairly cared for.
• Institutions related to The United Methodist Church would remain affiliated with the annual conference it is affiliated with, whether that annual conference withdraws or remains in the church. But such institutions could form cooperative relationships with other bodies and could, under the provisions of their own bylaws, change their relationship from one body to another.
• Any self-governing Methodist church would create its own Book of Discipline and be self-supporting financially, including funding its own bishops.
• The definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” would be expanded to include persons living in a same-sex partnership, union, or marriage, in keeping with Judicial Council decision 1341.
• Bishops are required to nominate as members of the conference board of ordained ministry only persons who are committed to upholding and enforcing the provisions of the Discipline related to the candidacy and ordination of LGBT persons. Bishops are also prohibited from ordaining a self-avowed practicing homosexual as a clergy person. In addition, bishops are prohibited from consecrating as bishop anyone who is a self-avowed practicing homosexual.
• Clergy found guilty by a trial court of performing a same-sex wedding would have a mandatory minimum penalty of one year’s suspension without pay for a first offense, and removal of clergy credentials for a second offense.
• Bishops would not be allowed to dismiss a complaint unless it has “no basis in law or fact.”
• “Just resolution” process and agreements would be reformed to ensure that complainants are included in the process and, where possible, agree to the “just resolution” before it is finalized.
• The counsel for the church in a church trial process would be given the same right of appeal for egregious errors of church law that the defendant now enjoys.

Summary
The Traditional Plan would retain the current stance of the *Discipline* regarding same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals. It would enhance accountability by:

- Encouraging annual conferences, bishops, clergy, and congregations unwilling to live within the requirements of the *Discipline* to withdraw from The United Methodist Church and form their own self-governing Methodist church.
- Providing that annual conferences not enforcing the *Discipline* could no longer use the United Methodist name or logo and could not give or receive funds through the general church.
- Providing a new accountability process for bishops, whereby the Council of Bishops could place a bishop on involuntary leave or involuntary retirement.
- Expanding the definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” to include persons living in a same-sex marriage, union, or partnership.
- Requiring that bishops nominate as members of the conference board of ordained ministry only persons willing to uphold and enforce the *Discipline*.
- Providing a mandatory minimum penalty for clergy found guilty of performing a same-sex wedding.
- Prohibiting bishops from dismissing a complaint unless it has no basis in law or fact.
- Reforming the “just resolution” process to include the required participation of the complainant.
- Allowing the church to appeal any egregious errors of church law from a trial process.

At the same time, the Traditional Plan acknowledges the reality that there are segments of the church that cannot live with the current prohibitions on same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals. The Plan provides a gracious way for annual conferences, bishops, clergy, and congregations to leave The United Methodist Church by a simple majority (or in some cases a 55 percent majority) vote and keep all their property, buildings, assets, and liabilities, in exchange only for covering unfunded pension liabilities.

**Implications**

- The Traditional Plan maintains the majority position of the church, reaffirmed by every General Conference since 1972. It maintains the unity of the church with its members outside the United States, who overwhelmingly hold the traditional view. It follows the premise that those who want to change the church should be the ones to leave, not those who are in continuity with the church’s historic teachings.
- It recognizes that there are parts of the church that can no longer live with the current strictures of the *Book of Discipline* and provides them with an easy and gracious way to leave the denomination and form a church that agrees with their theological understanding. Those who simply disagree with the church’s position are welcome to stay in the church, as long as they are willing to conform their behavior to the church’s requirements.
- The Traditional Plan seeks to enhance accountability for bishops, clergy, and annual conferences, to ensure that those remaining in The United Methodist Church do indeed live by its standards.
• Some progressive leaders have said they are not willing to leave the church under any circumstances. This may require that disciplinary measures are taken in order to align with the Discipline. There is some risk that such disciplinary measures may not work or may not be taken, which could lessen the effectiveness of the plan.

• The Traditional Plan offers a hopeful way to end the conflict in our church by allowing those disagreeing with the church’s teaching to go their separate way with a blessing. Church property and the trust clause ought not be used to coerce people to remain in a covenant against their conscience. The Traditional Plan is the only one of the three that includes a gracious exit provision for those unable to live with the church’s teachings and requirements.

• The Traditional Plan offers those who disagree with the effectiveness of this approach to also seek an exit from the denomination under the same terms.

• As annual conferences and congregations depart from the denomination, it will be necessary to redraw jurisdictional and annual conference lines.

• The Traditional Plan seeks a gracious end to the conflict of our church, so that valuable resources, time, and energy can be directed to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

There is no easy or painless way out of the impasse that besets our church, and there is no perfect solution. Of the three plans, however, the Traditional Plan seems the most faithful to Scripture and the most gracious in acknowledging that all members of the church may not be able to live with that solution. It provides a way for those who cannot live together to go their separate ways with blessing, allowing both to pursue ministry in faithfulness to their consciences without coercion.

The Connectional Conference Plan

The Connectional Conference Plan is the most complicated of the three proposals coming before the General Conference. It attempts to treat all perspectives on the church’s stance regarding LGBT persons fairly and equally. Due to the great complexity, I will not be able to cover all the details involved in the plan, but I will describe the broad approaches that the plan takes.

The essence of the Connectional Conference Plan is to create three new theological jurisdictions (called “connectional conferences”) in place of the current five geographical jurisdictions. Each connectional conference would cover the entire United States. There would be a Traditional Conference that would maintain the current Discipline’s prohibition of same-sex marriage and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. There would be a Unity Conference that would neither forbid nor require same-sex marriage and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals (this branch would be similar to what the One Church Plan envisions, but only for this branch). And there would be a Progressive Conference that would require and expect all pastors to perform same-sex weddings and all its annual conferences to ordain and appoint practicing homosexual clergy.
There would be a sorting process designed to limit the number of votes that would be needed. Current jurisdictions would vote first on which of the connectional conferences they want to affiliate with. (All jurisdictional property would then go with that connectional conference.) Any annual conference that disagreed with the decision of its jurisdiction could vote to join a different connectional conference. (All annual conference property, assets, and liabilities would go with the annual conference wherever it decided to affiliate.) Any local church that disagreed with the decision of its jurisdiction or annual conference could vote to join a different connectional conference. (All local church property, assets, and liabilities would go with the local church.) No local church would need to vote unless it disagreed with the decision of higher-up entities. Any vote by any church body to realign with a different connectional conference (once the plan is implemented) could happen no more frequently than in four years from a previous vote, in order to minimize continuing conflict and membership “churn.”

Bishops and clergy would similarly choose which connectional conference they wanted to join, with a possibility of transitional appointments until a suitable appointment is found for them in their preferred connectional conference. Clergy could serve in a different connectional conference, with the approval of that conference, as long as they adhered to the requirements of that conference.

There is some question whether all three connectional conferences would be populated, with the possibility that many progressives might stick with a Unity Conference instead of forming their own conference. But that decision would be up to each jurisdiction, annual conference, local church, and clergy person, rather than being dictated by the plan itself. There is no doubt that many annual conference boundaries would need to be redrawn and new annual conferences formed. There would be two or three annual conferences covering each geographical location in the United States. Each new connectional conference could determine whether or not it wanted to have jurisdictions as part of its new structure (hopefully with another name).

Under the Connectional Conference Plan, the primary identity would be the connectional conference. Some of the powers of the General Conference would be shifted to the connectional conference, including:

- Determining the number of bishops needed, electing the bishops, and funding the bishops (no funding for a bishop in the U.S. would come from a different connectional conference).
- Determining the qualifications, powers, and duties of clergy, including accountability through the complaint process.
- Determining the qualifications, powers, and duties of bishops, including accountability through the connectional conference college of bishops.
- Adapting most of the *Book of Discipline* according to its theological perspective.
- Holding its bishops accountable to the connectional conference rules and requirements.
- Creating whatever boards and agencies the connectional conference believes it needs to enhance effectiveness in ministry.
All three connectional conferences would still be part of The United Methodist Church, but each would have much more autonomy to operate in the way it believes would be most helpful and consistent with its theological perspective. The general church would consist of:

- A *General Book of Discipline* including the doctrinal standards and theological task, ministry of all Christians, new global social principles, and provisions governing all shared agencies.
- A shortened General Conference, mostly for celebration, sharing of best practices, and governing those parts of the church shared by all the connectional conferences.
- A redefined Council of Bishops, caring for ecumenical relationships, fostering cross-connection ministries and partnerships, and serving as a learning and support community for bishops (This redefined COB would not have supervisory authority over the bishops or over the connectional conferences, as that function would pass to each connectional college of bishops.).
- General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits (Wespath).
- The Publishing House.
- General Council on Finance and Administration.
- United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR).
- Parts of the General Board of Global Ministries as agreed upon by all the connectional conferences.

All the rest of the general boards and agencies would be subject to whether or not any connectional conferences want to continue to participate in them. Continuing agencies could serve one, two, or all three connectional conferences, and funding would be apportioned from only those conferences participating. Connectional conferences could also contract with specific agencies for fee-based services as desired.

The current central conferences outside the United States would be renamed as connectional conferences and be given equal power and authority with the US connectional conferences. Each non-U.S. connectional conference could remain separate as it is, join with other connectional conferences in its area, or join one of the three U.S. connectional conferences. If annual conferences in a given area realigned, non-U.S. connectional conference boundaries might need to be redrawn. Funding for bishops and ministries outside the U.S. would be shared by all three U.S. connectional conferences, as it currently is.

Enactment of this plan would require nine constitutional amendments that would hopefully be approved and ratified as a package. Implementation of the plan would take until 2023, and the 2024 General Conference would be shifted to 2025, moving the four-year cycle of General Conference so that it does not coincide with United States presidential election years.

**Summary**

The Connectional Conference Plan creates three new theological conferences (Traditional, Unity, and Progressive) in place of the current five geographical jurisdictions. It creates a process of sorting that seeks to minimize the number of entities that will need to vote on an affiliation. It continues a United Methodist Church umbrella of shared services and shared doctrinal standards,
but devolves much of the authority and accountability functions to the connectional conferences. Cross-connection ministries and partnerships could continue, but work within each connectional conference would be funded and governed by that conference’s theology and requirements. Bishops and clergy would only serve within their connectional conference.

Implications

- This is a radical restructuring of the church that seeks to treat each perspective fairly and equally.
- Not only would this restructure hopefully resolve the impasse over marriage and human sexuality, it is designed to create the opportunity to redesign the general agency structure into something that better serves the needs and theological emphases of various parts of the church. It would allow experimentation with ministry and structure within each connectional conference that could cross-pollinate the other conferences.
- This plan requires a two-thirds majority at General Conference and ratification by two-thirds of the members of all the annual conferences. It can only be adopted if there is broad support across the church for such an approach. At this time, it appears to lack that broad support across the theological spectrum. In the event that other plans fail to pass General Conference, it is possible this plan might serve as a compromise for a way forward.
- Even though one’s primary identity would be in the connectional conference, rather than in the general church, some evangelicals and traditionalists would still object to being part of the same general church where another part of the church can support and engage in practices that the Bible calls sin. These persons would feel the need to withdraw from the denomination, but there is no provision in the plan for them to do so.
- The connectional conferences would face a branding challenge in distinguishing their churches from those of a different connectional conference, sometimes in the same community.
- The four-year implementation period needed is too long for some who are impatient to resolve our impasse immediately. This contrasts with a 22-month implementation for the Traditional Plan and an 18-month implementation for the One Church Plan.

There is no easy or painless way out of the impasse that besets our church, and there is no perfect solution. Unique among the three plans, the Connectional Conference Plan seeks to provide a place for each theological perspective and to treat everyone equally. No one would be forced to leave the church, and hopefully fewer would desire to do so under this plan. I believe it could serve as a good “Plan B” in case the Traditional Plan fails to pass. It is certainly preferable to the One Church Plan and to the option of doing nothing.