

For the Advance Daily Christian Advocate, which includes all petitions that came before the conference, check here. (<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/gc2019-advance-edition-daily-christian-advocate>)

This special General Conference — the first such off-year gathering in the denomination since 1970 — came about after long tensions boiled over at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon.

- That General Conference authorized the bishops to form the 32-member Commission on a Way Forward to find ways to help the church stay together — and to call a special General Conference to take up the commission’s proposals.
- 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.

The three questions before the 2019 General Conference

- Will The UMC retain the language of “incompatibility” in our Social Principles?
- Will The UMC offer marriage ceremonies to same-gender couples?
- Will the church ordain duly qualified “self-avowed practicing” persons who are LGBT+?

**There were three plans proposed by the Commission on a Way Forward:**

- One Church Plan
  - Provided generous unity that gave conferences, churches, and pastors the flexibility to uniquely reach their missional context in relation to human sexuality without changing the connectional nature of The UMC
  - Would have left questions of marriage up to individual churches and clergy, and ordination up to conferences.
  - The One Church Plan had the backing of a majority of bishops and was affirmed by a majority of commission members.
- Connectional Conferences
  - Would have created three theologically based conferences in the United States: Progressive, Unity and Traditional
- Traditional Church
  - Affirmed what is currently in *Book of Discipline* and offered provisions for greater accountability and enforcement

### What is General Conference?

- Only body that speaks officially for The UMC
- Generally meets every 4 years
- Global body of delegates from each Annual Conference, number based upon membership
- Equal number of clergy and lay delegates

### **Make Up of 2019 General Conference - Global Representation**

- **864 Total Delegates – half clergy, half lay**
  - 504 from the USA (58%)
  - 260 from Africa (30%)
  - 50 from the Philippines (6%)
  - 40 from Europe and Eurasia (5%)
  - 10 from “concordat” churches with whom The UMC has special partnerships (1%)

### Legislative Priorities

Usually General Conference has multiple legislative committees, but because this whole gathering was dealing with the same parts of the ***Book of Discipline***, there was only one committee of the whole with all delegates.

A voting process was used to determine the order in which legislative petitions would be handled. During the priority process, delegates ranked legislation either as high or low priority. Some of the 23 legislative packages involved multiple petitions; others were petitions that could stand alone. Each petition changed part of the *Book of Discipline*, the denomination’s governing document.

Top Five priority items:

- Two WesPath recommendations for pension liabilities and Clergy Retirement Security program
- Tradition Plan with the exception of two petitions (90041 and 90048)
- Disaffiliation petitions (Taylor and Boyette)
- One Church Plan

The totals showed that the Traditional Plan was second behind pensions, and the One Church Plan was fifth behind legislation that deals with disaffiliating churches.

By 56 votes, the Traditional Plan topped the One Church Plan.

### **What Happened?**

The timeline for implementation for legislation that is constitutional will be January 1, 2020. Legislation approved at GC2019 will not take effect in central conferences until 12 months after the 2020 General Conference.

### **WesPath petitions:**

- The delegates approved two petitions recommended by Wespath Benefits and Investments, the denomination's pension agency. Wespath manages investments for pensions and other retirement-plan assets on behalf of conferences, which are plan sponsors and legally responsible for paying benefits.
- One petition requires that any local church that withdraws or is closed must pay, at a minimum, its fair share of unfunded pension liability for their annual conference.
- The other petition spells out that any clergy members who end their relationship with a conference will be treated as "terminated vested" participants, meaning their accrued benefits would be safe and converted to an individual account balance.
- This was one area where all agreed to care for the security of retirees and those active clergy invested in the WesPath retirement program.
- No matter what else happened, it was a priority to make sure these changes were adopted for the protection of the pension plan now and into the future.

### **Minority Report on the One Church Plan**

- A minority report was filed after the Traditional Plan was moved forward by the legislative committee. A minority report is a substitution for the report of the legislative committee, meaning the One Church Plan was being substituted for the Traditional Plan if the minority report was supported
- The One Church Plan was defeated by a vote of 54.5% to 45.5% (449-374). Minority Report for OCP was not accepted by vote of /449-374 votes.

### **Traditional Church Plan**

- Following the defeat of the minority report, debate moved toward the calendar items pertaining to the Traditional Plan.
- The United Methodist General Conference 2019 passed The Traditional Plan 438 to 384. More than 53 percent of the multinational denomination's top lawmaking body supported the Traditional Plan.
- The Traditional Church Plan would impose mandatory penalties on those who do not adhere to church law that prohibits self-avowed practicing homosexuals from serving as clergy and clergy from officiating at same-sex weddings.
  - Reinforces the church's bans on same-gender unions and "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy.
  - Affirms the church's current bans on ordaining LGBTQ clergy and officiating at or hosting same-sex marriage.

- Retains church law restrictions against homosexuality and seeks stricter enforcement.
- A motion was made and adopted to request a declaratory decision by the Judicial Council on the constitutionality of the Traditional Plan.
- Still uncertain is how much of the legislation will take effect. Parts of the plan already have been declared unconstitutional.
  - The parts of the Traditional Plan that the Judicial Council has held constitutional include an augmented definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” to say it includes people “living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual.”
  - Also previously held constitutional is legislation that sets a minimum penalty for clergy performing a same-sex wedding of one year’s suspension without pay for the first offense and loss of credentials for the second.

### **Disaffiliation petitions**

- Delegates voted to adopt the minority report for one of the petitions on disaffiliation, which then passed. (It is a high bar exit plan.)
- It allows churches, with limitations, to leave the denomination with their property. The Judicial Council ruled a previous iteration of the legislation unconstitutional but the new version is not, at this point, up for court review.

Some additional info concerning Voting Patterns that may be included here.

- The division of the body was clear from voting patterns throughout the General Conference.
- Almost every vote fell somewhere in the 53-58% to 43-47% range. One vote was even an exact 50-50 division.

### **Super Majority**

- The voting patterns also tell us that there is a clear super majority of delegates from outside the United States: our three African central conferences, with delegates from Eurasia and the Philippines.
- 2/3 of American and Western European delegates supported the One Church Plan.
- 1/3 of U.S. delegates and this super majority of Central Conference delegates supported the Traditional Plan.

### **What We Don’t Know Yet**

Constitutionality:

- The Judicial Council will address the request for declaratory decisions at its next scheduled meeting April 23-25 in Evanston, Illinois.

- Any piece of legislation that the Judicial Council declares unconstitutional will not be included in the ***Book of Discipline***.
- Nine petitions in the Traditional Plan — 90033, 90034, 90035, 90037, 90038, 90039, 90040, 90059 and 90066 — were deemed unconstitutional. The second sentence in another petition, 90045, also was found unconstitutional.
- The nine petitions deal with subjects such as episcopal accountability and responsibilities, composition of boards of ordained ministry, the examination of candidates for ministry by the boards of ordained ministry and disaffiliation, or procedure for churches that want to leave. Petition 90045 addresses just resolutions.
- In their decisions, the court looked at due process and the principle of legality in assessing the Traditional Plan. That principle of legality “means that all individuals and entities are equally bound by church law,” the decision said. That decision said the law was to be applied fairly at all levels of the connection.
- The April meeting will be the Judicial Council’s third review of the legislation to see if it is in line with the denomination’s constitution.
- In October, the Judicial Council — in a unanimous ruling — found seven of 17 petitions unconstitutional and identified unconstitutional portions in two others. It ruled eight petitions constitutional.
- After some amendments to the plan, the General Conference on Feb. 25 asked the Judicial Council to review the legislation again. Early on Feb. 26, delegates learned the court — citing the same constitutional issues as before — ruled seven of the petitions unconstitutional and identified an unconstitutional sentence in another.
- Plan supporters amended some of the legislation again but didn’t address all the previously identified constitutional issues.