

Background Information on General Conference

The only body that can set official policy and speak for the denomination is the General Conference. The General Conference is an international body of nearly 1000 delegates that meets every four years to conduct the business of the United Methodist Church. The delegates are elected by annual conferences to attend General Conference and represent approximately 12.8 million United Methodists from around the world. Half of the General Conference delegates are laity and the other half are clergy.

In the same manner, annual conferences are attended by representatives from local churches within their geographical boundaries. For example, our Western North Carolina Annual Conference (WNCC) is attended by lay delegates elected by each local church (at the annual Charge Conference) in addition to each pastor appointed to that church. Jamestown UMC has two appointed clergy who attend annual conference along with two lay delegates. Additional laity are selected to represent each district to “equalize” the number of retired clergy and those who serve in appointments outside the local church (chaplains, professors etc.). These district delegates attend and vote during annual conference.

Our WNCC includes approximately 1100 churches, over 1600 clergy (both active and retired) and a total membership of approximately 285,000. The annual meeting of the WNCC is held at Lake Junaluska in late June to discuss the petitions and business before the conference. Every four years in advance of the General Conference, the clergy and lay delegates of the WNCC elect around 20 persons (half clergy and half laity) to represent our annual conference. The number of General Conference delegates from every annual conference is determined by a formula based on clergy and lay membership.

Constitutional Structure of the United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church does not have a central headquarters or single executive leader. Duties are divided among bodies that include the General Conference, The Council of Bishops and the Judicial Council. Each of these entities is required by our Constitution, the foundational document of our structure, and plays a significant role in the life of the church.

General Conference

This is the primary legislative body of the UMC. It is the only body that speaks officially for the church. It meets every four years to discuss, define and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. It authorizes the organization, promotion, and administrative work of the church. It also defines the powers and duties of UMC bishops. Approved legislation in the

General Conference will result in additions and/or revisions to the UMC Book of Discipline (book on order and belief) and the UMC Book of Resolutions (policies on social issues.)

Council of Bishops

The COB gives general oversight to the mission and ministry of the entire UMC. Bishops are elected by Jurisdictional Conferences. The WNCC is a member of the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference which meets every four years at Lake Junaluska. Bishops preside at the General Conference but do not vote on legislation.

Judicial Council

This is the judicial body or “supreme court” of the UMC. It is made up of nine members (both laity and clergy) who are elected at General Conference. It meets twice a year to consider whether actions of the various church bodies adhere to the constitution and rules of the Book of Discipline.

Our Affiliations

Jamestown UMC is part of the Northern Piedmont District of the Western North Carolina Conference.

There are 8 geographical districts in the WNCC.

Our Bishop is Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. His office is located in the conference headquarters in Huntersville. www.wnccumc.org

Our District Superintendent is Rev. Bev Copley. Her office is in Greensboro. www.northernpiedmontumc.org

How Did We Get Here?

In 1968, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged to become the denomination we are today. There was no mention of homosexuality in either discipline nor prohibitions on same-sex marriage and no mention of the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” At the 1972 General Conference, a committee developing the new Social Principles for the UMC included in its report: *“We declare our acceptance of homosexuals as persons of sacred worth, and we welcome them into the fellowship of this church. Further, we insist that society ensure their human and civil rights.”* Following debate, this addition was added to the statement: *“though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider the practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”* Later language added to the UMC Discipline declared that *“self-avowed practicing homosexuals”* cannot become United Methodist clergy and that *“ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by United Methodist ministers”* nor held in United Methodist churches.

Later General Conferences added additional wording to make clear that it is not same-sex attraction itself that is incompatible with Christian teaching, but the acting on and practicing of those desires. This distinction reflected the intent of General Conference not to, in any way, condemn homosexual persons, but instead focus on same-sex behavior or conduct. Therefore,

our Social Principles state: *We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church and in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others and with self ... We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.*

Nearly every General Conference since 1972 has dealt with the subject of human sexuality (primarily on the issues of same-sex marriage and the ordination of homosexual persons). Thousands of pieces of legislation have been introduced and this has resulted in lengthy and painful debate. The conflict is not due to a lack of awareness about Biblical passages related to sexuality and marriage. Rather, it is due to a difference in how those scriptures are interpreted. On one side of the conflict are those who align themselves with the traditional teaching that marriage is between one man and one woman. On the other side are those who maintain that biblical prohibitions of homosexuality are addressing practices such as ritual prostitution, pederasty, and sexual promiscuity, rather than committed relationships between same-gender persons. Those on both sides of this conflict maintain that they are trying to be faithful to their understanding of the scriptures, which has led to an unfortunate division in the church.

In 2016, General Conference once again found itself having intense debate over this issue. During the second week of the conference, the body voted to table all legislation dealing with human sexuality, and instead, ask the bishops to take the lead on this issue. A commission was formed to devise a way forward for the UMC. Thirty-two lay and clergy leaders from all parts of the global UMC connection who identified with all sides of the issue were selected. The commission gathered nine times over seventeen months. The Commission on a Way Forward delivered a plan to the Council of Bishops in July 2018. The plan provided 3 different options:

- 1) The One Church Plan – would remove language from the Book of Discipline restricting ordination of self-avowed homosexuals and same-sex marriages and gave conferences, churches and pastors the flexibility to decide whether or not to allow same-sex marriages in their context
- 2) The Connectional Conference Plan – would create 3 values-based connectional conferences (Traditional, Unity and Progressive) – annual conferences, churches and clergy could choose which conference with which to affiliate
- 3) The Traditional Plan – would maintain the current wording in the Book of Discipline and strengthen complaints and trial proceedings

A special session of the General Conference was held in St. Louis in February, 2019 and the Traditional Plan was adopted by a vote of 53% in favor and 47% opposed. Also, a disaffiliation plan (sometimes called an “exit plan” for congregations) was considered and voted-on but the vote was voided because of voting irregularities. In the aftermath of 2019 General Conference,

many persons came to the conclusion that the UMC was still at an impasse and the Church's mission was being impeded.

A few months after the 2019 General Conference concluded, Bishop John Yambasu (Sierra Leone UMC Episcopal Area) convened a meeting in Chicago of theologically diverse United Methodists to create an amicable process of separation. A Protocol Meditation Team began work on writing proposed legislation for the 2020 General Conference that would provide a plan for separation. The proposal for restructuring and separation was entitled, "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation." Additionally, other proposals for separation were being crafted as well for consideration by the 2020 General Conference.

The 2020 General Conference was postponed because of COVID-19 and rescheduled for August 2022. In early March 2022, the decision was made to postpone General Conference until 2024 because of the complexities associated with international travel (from 40 nations on 4 continents) due to COVID-19. On the same day that this decision was announced, a group of clergy and laity announced their decision to leave the UMC and form a new denomination (Global Methodist Church).

Going Forward

A date for the 2024 General Conference should be released soon. Many believe that the proposed Protocol legislation will still be a primary focus. However, until General Conference takes place, we do not know what our options are going to be moving forward. Once General Conference meets in 2024, the options we have should be clear and then we will be able to consider them as a community of faith and discern together what we believe God would have us to do. In the meantime, our focus will be on the mission of ***Loving God. Serving Others. Growing Together.*** We will keep on focusing on making God's Kingdom real in Jamestown and finding ways to be and do for others what Christ has been and done for us.