

What the United Methodist world-wide General Conference Means for Parkview United Methodist Church

Every four years a world-wide gathering of United Methodists takes place. This gathering is called the General Conference. Each Annual Conference--meaning the geographical area that is under the direction of a Bishop--sends a handful of delegates to the world-wide General Conference. Delegates to the General Conference (of which half are ordained/clergy/pastors and the other half are lay members) are in effect a legislative body. The General Conference delegates form the only body that can speak and decide on behalf of the entire United Methodist denomination. What they decide goes into a book called *The Book of Discipline*. After the General Conference meets every four years a new version of *The Book of Discipline* is published. The only way to change anything in *The Book of Discipline* is if the elected delegates to the General Conference approve of that change.

Ever since The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 as different Methodist denominations came together, there has been a lot of debate and legislation that has to do with human sexuality and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people. Every four years since the start of The United Methodist Church the gathering of elected delegates from across the world have addressed or debated this topic to some degree.¹

In 2016, the General Conference gathering was especially heated. A decision was made to form the Commission on a Way Forward. This group of Bishops, pastors, and lay members were authorized to examine paragraphs in *The Book of Discipline* concerning human sexuality and to explore options to strengthen church unity given how deeply divided United Methodists are regarding that topic. The Commission on a Way Forward released their report in the fall of 2018.² The 2016 General Conference delegates agreed to meet three years later to consider and vote on the Commission on a Way Forward's work.

The Commission put forth three plans for the delegates to the 2019 Special General Conference to consider: 1) The One Church Plan, 2) The Connectional Conference Plan and 3) The Traditionalist Plan.³ The delegates to the 2019 Special General Conference approved The Traditionalist Plan. This plan does not ban LGBTQIA+ folks from being United Methodist per se. Rather, it reaffirmed the existing language in *The Book of Discipline* and sought to strengthen enforcement and penalties. In April 2019 the Judicial Council, which is effectively the supreme court of The United Methodist Church, ruled several of the provisions in The Traditionalist Plan were unconstitutional according to *The Book of Discipline*. However, they ruled most of the provisions to be valid and constitutional.⁴

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/homosexuality-full-book-of-discipline-statements>

² https://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/news_and_statements/documents/Way_Forward_Report_-_Final_-_ENGLISH.pdf

³ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-commission-on-a-way-forward-report-what-you-should-know>

⁴ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-did-the-judicial-council-decide-about-the-traditional-plan>

The next world-wide gathering of United Methodists was set for May 2020. Even though the outcome of the 2019 Special General Conference was to reaffirm and reinforce the existing rules about clergy not being allowed to perform same-sex weddings, ordination boards not being allowed to approve LGBTQIA+ individuals to be ordained, and bishops not being allowed to actually ordain LGBTQIA+ clergy, a group called The Wesley Covenant Association (as well as other smaller organizations) continued to push for a way to start a new Methodist denomination that would continue to support this current position of The United Methodist Church.

Throughout the rest of 2019, leaders of various groups within the denomination met with each other to form a legislative proposal that they eventually called *The Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation*⁵ (I'll just refer to it from here on out as *The Protocol*). The group was formed by Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone Episcopal Area (basically a combination of several Annual Conferences). He invited five persons from three constituencies within The United Methodist Church – traditionalists, centrists, and progressives -- to come together and write a piece of legislation that would allow for a denomination rooted in the Wesley Covenant Association to have funding and provide a way for local congregations and Annual Conferences to affiliate with this new denomination. This group's expectation was that the delegates to the 2020 General Conference would consider and approve their plan.

Of course, the world-wide Covid pandemic made it impossible for a world-wide gathering of United Methodists to meet at the originally scheduled May 2020 General Conference. The new plan is to meet from August 29-September 6, 2022. Assuming delegates from outside the United States are allowed to travel to the US, the General Conference delegates from across the world will gather in Minneapolis to finally consider the items that were originally going to be brought up during the 2020 General Conference. Of course, the biggest items that will be considered at that time will be legislative proposals based on *The Protocol*.

The Protocol lays out a way for a new Methodist denomination to form that will be funded by \$25 million dollars from the current United Methodist Church. The traditionalists, centrists, and progressives who helped create *The Protocol* expect it to be approved by the General Conference delegates in 2022 since they believe the vast majority of General Conference delegates will vote based on what traditionalist, centrist, or progressive group they affiliate with.

However, much like how many expected the "One Church Plan" proposed by The Commission on the Way Forward to be what the 2019 Special General Conference delegates would approve and were surprised when The Traditionalist Plan passed. Simply put, there are a lot of unknowns going into the rescheduled General Conference 2022, most notably if *The Protocol* written years earlier will still be what the General Conference delegates will ultimately support.

⁵ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/protocol-of-reconciliation-and-grace-through-separation-faq>

The delegates to the General Conference from the Wisconsin Annual Conference⁶ shared during the Wisconsin Virtual Annual Conference meeting that they strongly support another piece of legislation that will be considered at General Conference 2022: [“The Christmas Covenant.”](#)

The legislation proposed in The Christmas Covenant was crafted by United Methodists from Africa, Europe, and the Philippines in large response to the ways United States United Methodists were crafting legislation that would divide or even dissolve the worldwide United Methodist Church. The Christmas Covenant will be considered at the General Conference 2022 meeting and will ask the delegates to consider the following actions:

- Establish 5 new episcopal areas in Africa as decided upon by the 2016 General Conference. This is a proposal is from the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters.
- Establish a United States Regional Conference as proposed by the Connectional Table (our Christmas Covenant legislation embraces and incorporates this proposal)
- Establish a vibrant and equal regional conference structure for The United Methodist Church which transforms existing central conferences into regional conferences, and the formation of a regional conference for the church in the United States.
- Upon ratification of a new regional conference structure, General Conference shall authorize a study to update and perfect the new regional conference structure to realize full equity between regions. The study is to be conducted by the Connectional Table and the Standing Committees on Regional Conferences in the United States and around the globe. A report, including any recommendations, will be presented to the 2024 General Conference for action.

From the “Fact and Question” page on The Christmas Covenant Website⁷:

What is the Christmas Covenant Stance on the Inclusion of LGBTQI persons?

The Christmas Covenant legislation ensures that no regional conference can be forced to do anything against its will. No regional conference can impose on any other regional conference. Recognizing the sacred value of all persons as created in the image of God, the Christmas Covenant encourages regional conferences to consider ministry approaches that reflect the theological convictions of the missional contexts they serve.

Is the Christmas Covenant in conflict with the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation?

No. These are two separate pieces of legislation focused on two different things. While the Protocol has “regionalization” as one of its pillars, it does not have proposed legislation to make that happen. The Protocol is an amicable separation proposal. The

⁶ <https://www.wisconsinumc.org/event-detail/13308063/item/13308130>

⁷ <https://www.christmascovenant.com/faqs>

Christmas Covenant is about the future of a vital UMC engaged in effective mission work rooted in mutuality, interdependence, and respect for the missional contexts of each regional conference it seeks to establish. The Christmas Covenant does not prevent any part of the UMC from leaving the denomination. There are already existing remedies in the Book of Discipline passed in 2019 that are available for churches that want to depart from the UMC.

In reference to that last line, during the Special General Conference in 2019 the delegates passed ¶ 2553 “Disaffiliation of Local Churches Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality.”⁸ Under this addition to *The Book of Discipline* a church can leave The United Methodist Church “Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the *Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.” At the Wisconsin Annual Conference gathering in June 2021 Waldo: Trinity United Methodist Church submitted a petition to leave the denomination based on their desire to no longer affiliate with the denomination. However, an amendment was proposed and was approved to postpone the vote on the disaffiliation petition by Waldo.

In effect, Waldo’s failed petition to leave the United Methodist Church through ¶ 2553 was on the basis that by the end of General Conference 2022 there should be more comprehensive and advantageous legislation. If Waldo’s petition would have been approved they would not be able to affiliate with The Global Methodist Church since that denomination does not actually exist yet. Basically, the Annual Conference delegates asked Waldo: Trinity United Methodist Church to wait a bit longer before disaffiliation. The Annual Conference delegates by adopting the amendment to postpone the vote on their disaffiliation petition are asking for patience until the General Conference (remember, the only body that can speak for the entire, worldwide denomination) meets late next summer.

What this means for local United Methodist Churches like Parkview UMC is that until at least late summer 2022 there is no real need to decide our future based on *The Protocol*. That being said, Parkview, like many United Methodist congregations will need to be prepared after General Conference 2022 to have important discussions about what Methodist denomination to affiliate with if the need arises. More broadly, however, between now and when General Conference meets, local churches like ours have a responsibility to commit to growing in knowledge of our denomination, our empathy and understanding toward each other, and our love and devotion to the God who calls us one to be the Body of Christ.

⁸ <https://cdn.cokesbury.com/images/community/cokesburyportals/2016boderrata.pdf> (scroll down to page 4)

The traditionalist organization that has been the most vocal and organized over the past decade is The Wesley Covenant Association. For years they have been setting the groundwork for a new Methodist denomination that would split off from The United Methodist Church. In late February 2021, they announced the name and logo of the new Methodist denomination, The Global Methodist Church.⁹ In addition, they published *The Transitional Book of Doctrines and Disciplines of the Global Methodist Church*.¹⁰

To be very clear, The Global Methodist Church does **not** technically exist right now. Instead, it will officially begin under two conditions: 1) The 2022 General Conference approves the necessary parts of *The Protocol* or 2) “Alternatively, if it becomes apparent that the leading bishops, centrists, and progressives who covenanted to support the Protocol no longer do so, then the [Global Methodist transitional] council will consider bringing the new church into existence without delay” as their website globalmethodist.org states.

Another point of clarity is that currently the 2016 *Book of Discipline* and the constitutional provisions passed by The Traditionalist Plan during the 2019 Special General Conference are in effect. This means that

- a United Methodist pastor could be brought up on charges after performing a same-sex wedding;
- the Staff-Parish Relations Committee of a local congregation, the District Committee on Ordained Ministry and the Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry are not supposed to approve LGBTQIA+ individuals to be United Methodist clergy;
- and Bishops are not to ordain LGBTQIA+ individuals.

However, a majority of delegates from the 400+ Wisconsin United Methodist congregations that gather each year for Annual Conference have voted to not approve any money be spent on church trials to try pastors for officiating a same-sex wedding. In 2016, the Wisconsin Board of Ordained Ministry decided that they will *not* bar someone from ordination based on LGBTQIA+ status. Most notably, in response to the 2019 world-wide Special General Conference, the delegates to the 2019 Wisconsin Annual Conference passed a resolution publicly disagreeing with The Traditionalist Plan.

Parkview UMC has members, friends, and constituents who could be considered centrists, traditionalists or progressives. Some support the outcome of the 2019 Special General Conference while others support the protest resolution passed by the Wisconsin Annual Conference. Some are very interested in affiliating with the Global Methodist Church when it comes into official existence, while others want to remain within The United Methodist Church. What all this means is that we must be intentional over the next year and a half to prepare ourselves well for General Conference 2022 and the likelihood that the delegates elected from around the world will pass some sort of plan that will allow local congregations to decide what Methodist denomination they wish to affiliate with.

⁹ <https://wesleyancovenant.org/2021/02/26/the-global-methodist-church/>

¹⁰ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/601c578cafa6797db50eb207/t/60353e3efac80f4fe49a2056/1614102080298/English+Transitional+Book+of+Doctrines+and+Discipline_.pdf

Under *The Protocol* a group such as our Administrative Council will ultimately decide when and how the congregation would vote which Methodist denomination to affiliate with. However, *The Protocol* says nothing about how pastors are to help and support their congregation in preparing for that vote. To prepare ourselves well, my plan is to help you all better understand what are the factors and options as well as to better understand one another. By the time the delegates begin to arrive in Minneapolis late next summer (2022), I want everyone who is a part of the Parkview church family and community to have gone through a small group study.

The first major part of this small group study is to briefly review the history and structure of our denomination. Another major part of the study will be to take into account the similarities and differences between *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* and *The Transitional Book of Doctrines and Disciplines of the Global Methodist Church*. My goal is to help you all better understand your current denomination and see how it would be similar and different from the Global Methodist Church.

Of course another major part of the small group study will be participating in the Bible study called *Faithful and Inclusive: the Bible, Sexuality, and The United Methodist Church*. The video study is led by Rev. Rob Fuquay who pastors a large United Methodist Church in Indiana. The spirit behind this study is to help those who are not supportive of same-sex weddings or LGBTQIA+ clergy to gain insights into how fellow members of the Body of Christ, this denomination and this congregation can hold the opposite stance. Likewise, for those who are open and affirming toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, this study is an invitation to think more critically and theologically about why you hold that stance as a Christian. Joe Monforton, the Parkview Adult Bible Study leader, will assist me in leading this study and will help provide additional discussion questions as well as rebuttals and responses to some of Rev. Fuquay's arguments.

My deepest prayer as your pastor is that by actively and fully participating in these small group studies we all will better understand one another and can remain in Christian love toward each other no matter what happens in 2022. As members of the Body of Christ and part of the Parkview congregation, we owe it to one another to be in authentic dialogue despite our differences, to remain committed to loving each other through these times and to remember that we are each others' family members, neighbors and friends who will continue to live with and alongside one another this year, next year, and beyond.