

Human Sexuality News from our United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church's top legislative body, the General Conference, which typically meets once every four years, will meet in St. Louis, Missouri, for a Special General Conference **February 23-26, 2019**. The theme will be "God is Able." The Council of Bishops has called for this Special Session to receive and act on the report from the Commission on a Way Forward.

Special Session Overview

Since 1972, when the Church set parameters in the Book of Discipline for ministry to, with, and by homosexual people, The United Methodist Church has struggled with this matter.

The 2016 General Conference took a major step toward trying to resolve the struggle when it approved a Commission on a Way Forward to be appointed by and make recommendations to the Council of Bishops.

The Commission was charged with finding a way forward for our church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible.

In February 2019, a called General Conference will consider legislation growing out of the Commission's work. The hope is that decisions made in 2019 will allow the 2020 General Conference to focus on our mission and shared ministry.

St. John UMC

This Special General Conference matters to all local United Methodist Congregations but we are uncertain of the effects at this time. Therefore, prayer is the most important action for every congregation and individual. Pray for the Holy Spirit to lead our Church forward in the mission of "Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World."

The Church Council believes it is important that the individuals of our congregation are informed on this matter. In the following pages you will find a summary of the 93-page report presented to the Council of Bishops in May 2018 by the Commission on a Way Forward. Numerous news articles and official publications from the United Methodist Church are available below. Additionally, many groups, caucuses, and individuals have sought to predict and make decisions on this matter, but the General Conference is the only entity that speaks officially for the United Methodist Church theology, policy, and practice. All other statements are opinion or speculation. Please take time to read, pray, and reflect. On January 23rd after the Wednesday night supper, we will hold an informational meeting to explain the three plans and encourage a 30 day intentional prayer focus on the Spirit-led work of the committee at this special conference.

- **Special Session of General Conference 2019**
 - <http://www.umc.org/topics/general-conference-2019-special-session>
- **North Georgia Conference resources & news**
 - <https://www.ngumc.org/gc2019>
- **Commission on a Way Forward background**
 - <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/the-commission-on-a-way-forward-report-what-you-should-know>
- **Video explaining the Three Plans**
 - <https://vimeo.com/217081225>

(Borrowed from Hickory Flat UMC)

A Way Forward: Summary of the Three Plans

Below is a brief summary, adapted from the Minnesota Annual Conference with permission, of three plans before the Special 2019 General Conference.

The full report from the Commission on a Way Forward is found at www.ngumc.org/GC2019

One-Church Plan

(Recommended by the Council of Bishops)

This plan would maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many parts of the world as possible, adapting some non-essential practices to different mission fields. It is based on the belief that we can remain together as The United Methodist Church even if we disagree about matters of human sexuality. No annual conferences, bishops, congregations, or pastors will be compelled to act contrary to their convictions. It allows us to affirm that our mission is more important than our disagreements.

Some of the key components of this plan:

- Acknowledges that the church is not of one mind on matters of human sexuality.
- Would remove the statement that the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching."
- Relies on pastoral discretion. Clergy would decide which weddings to officiate or not officiate.
- Affirms the sanctity of marriage between two adults.
- Conference Boards of Ordained Ministry would discern who is fit and fruitful for clergy service in their annual conference.
- This plan protects clergy rights to individual conscience. The Book of Discipline would protect clergy who do not want to officiate same-sex weddings. Likewise, all would be allowed to follow their conscience on the matter of ordination.
- This plan would remove current prohibitions without creating obligations or affirmation.
- This plan should put an end to clergy trials that are damaging to individuals and to our public witness.
- It respects local church wishes. No local church would be forced to vote. However, church property would not be used in same-gender weddings unless the local church specifically allows it.
- Bishops would take each local church into account concerning who is or is not a good fit for that appointment.

Gains of This Plan:

- Allows for contextualization in different parts of the U.S. (this already exists in Africa, Asia, and Europe).
- More coherent theology for unity because it no longer assumes that human sexuality is a defining theological issue for The United Methodist Church.
- No more clergy trials.
- No church will be forced to vote on this matter.
- Provides a public witness to those outside the church that our love for one another in Christ and our desire to fulfill Christ's mission is stronger than our disagreements.

A Way Forward: Summary of the Three Plans

Pains of this Plan:

- Does not completely satisfy some progressive United Methodists because it does not totally eliminate discrimination against LGBTQ members.
- Does not completely satisfy some traditionalist United Methodists because allowing same-gender marriage or ordination of LGBTQ members violates their interpretation of scripture.

Connectional Conferences Model

The Connectional Conferences Model is grounded in a core that includes shared doctrine and services, and one Council of Bishops, while creating different branches that would have clearly defined values such as accountability, contextualization, and justice. This plan gives each connectional conference the ability to change portions on the Book of Discipline (excluding sections I-V).

In the U.S., the five regional Jurisdictional Conferences would be replaced by three overlapping conferences: one traditional conference, one progressive conference, and one centrist or “uniting” conference. Each annual conference would choose to be a member of one of the three connectional conferences based on their affinity to the conference’s theological stance on human sexuality. Any local church that disagrees with the annual conference decision could vote to join a different branch conference.

Gains of this Plan:

- Makes a place for three viewpoints within The United Methodist Church, yet creates enough separation that there is clarity for each position.
- Conferences and local churches could make a clear choice on their view of human sexuality while retaining some of the missional advantages of a global church.

Pains of this Plan:

- Creates a complex structure that is more congregational than connectional.
- It would take years of administrative work to implement—there would be many constitutional amendments that would be difficult to ratify in annual conferences around the world.
- Would not satisfy some traditional United Methodists because it would allow marriage and ordination of LGBTQ people in some parts of the UMC.
- Would not satisfy some progressive United Methodists because LGBTQ people will be discriminated against in some branches of the UMC.
- Assumes that churches are of one mind on this matter, though we know that there are varied viewpoints within congregations.
- A similar model was created in 1939 which separated a majority of African Americans and the rest of the church into distinct conferences. It was finally disbanded in 1968 with the creation of The United Methodist Church. This has caused lasting pain in our denomination.

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Traditionalist Model

The Traditionalist Model would affirm the current Book of Discipline statement that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Boards of Ordained Ministry would still be prohibited from recommending LGBTQ candidates for ordination. Officiating same-sex marriages would remain a chargeable offense, and being a self-avowed and practicing gay clergy would continue to be a chargeable offense.

The Traditionalist Model would demand increased accountability to the Book of Discipline—not only for individual pastors but for churches, bishops, and annual conferences, all of which could face swift and strong punishment if they do not follow the Book of Discipline.

Gains of this Plan:

- Essentially preserves the status quo.
- Fully satisfies some traditionalist United Methodists.
- Requires no constitutional amendments.

Pains of this Plan:

- Disagreement on this matter would continue without resolution.
- Our mission would be compromised by costly trials.
- This plan is not a path to unity, but asks progressive United Methodist churches and clergy to form an “autonomous, affiliated, or concordat church.”
- May alienate millennials and future generations, for whom this matter is not a defining part of their faith.
- Would elevate our stance on matters of human sexuality to a core function of our denomination, requiring a certification process for annual conferences and bishops around maintaining standards against LGBTQ marriage and ordination.

North Georgia Annual Conference Delegation:

Lay Delegates:

Mathew A. Pinson
Jane Finley
Keith Cox
Jeff Jernigan
Bill Stikes
Randy Brown
Lathem Postell
Rachel Fullerton
Joe Wesley Kilpatrick
Tonya Murphy
Gary Fuller

Clergy Delegates:

Philip Daniel Schroeder
Jane Newman Brooks
P. Alice Rogers
James Carlton Cantrell III
Steven Wood Sr.
Richard Don Winn Sr.
Charles Walter Savage II
Kyle Edward Tomlinson
Herzen De Vega Andone
Byron Eric Thomas
Nora Elizabeth Colmenares