

# Commission on the Way Forward and 2019 General Conference

The Council of Bishops has called a Special Session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church to be held February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri. The purpose will be to receive and act on a report from the **Commission on a Way Forward** based on the recommendations of the Council of Bishops. The 32-member Commission was authorized by General Conference 2016 and appointed by the Council of Bishops to examine paragraphs in The Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and exploring options to strengthen the unity of the church.

## Report of the Commission on the Way Forward – The Three Options (Summarized)

### (1) The Commission on the Way Forward

2016 General Conference – Debate and voting on resolutions related to the position of the UMC on homosexuality as stated in The Discipline became gridlocked. It was proposed that they be tabled and a group formed to thoroughly investigate options for updating the denominations position. The outcome was the formation of The Commission on the Way Forward.

From the Commission report:

*Bishops nominated and selected 32 members to serve on the Commission, focusing on a diverse body that represents our global church. In the Commission there are persons from nine countries with a variety of theological perspectives. The Commission is one third laity, one third clergy, and one third bishops and includes younger persons, gay persons, professors, administrators, pastors, youth ministers, campus ministers, lay leaders, large church pastors, and persons identified with renewal and advocacy groups. There is Korean, Hispanic, African- American, Filipino, European, and African representation.*

The Commission received a lot of input from all areas of the UMC. It assessed how The Discipline might be changed and how its changes would affect the church in concrete ways.

Its report is now complete and can be downloaded from the [tecumseh.umd.org](http://tecumseh.umd.org).

### (2) The One Church Plan

From the Commission report:

*The One Church Plan provides a generous unity that gives conferences, churches, and pastors the flexibility to uniquely reach their missional context without disbanding the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church. In the One Church Plan, no annual conferences, bishops, congregations, or pastors are compelled to act contrary to their convictions. The plan maintains the leadership structure of The United Methodist Church, including the Council of Bishops, the General Conference, and the annual conferences as one body and one church. It offers greater freedom to many who desire change but do not want to violate The Book of Discipline. . . . The United Methodist Church remains in connection, upholding unity of mission without uniformity of practice. The plan grants space for traditionalists to continue to offer ministry as they have in the past; space for progressives to exercise freely a more complete ministry with LGBTQ persons; and space for all United Methodists to continue to coexist without disrupting their ministries. Additionally, this plan creates space for annual conferences in various part of the world to practice ministry according to their*

*national or regional contexts with the connectional autonomy of the adaptable portions of The Book of Discipline.*

*The One Church Plan removes the language from The Book of Discipline used in the United States that restricts pastors and churches from conducting same-sex weddings and annual conferences from ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexual persons. It adds language that intentionally protects the religious freedom of pastors and churches who choose not to perform or host same-sex weddings and Boards of Ordained Ministry and bishops who choose not to credential or ordain self-avowed practicing homosexual persons. . . .*

*The plan ends the threat of church trials over same-sex weddings. Boards of Ordained Ministry already have the authority to discern whom to credential. Local churches already have the authority to establish wedding policies. Pastors already discern whom they will or will not marry. . . .*

### **(3) The Connectional Conference Plan**

From the Commission report:

- *Five U.S. jurisdictions are replaced by three connectional conferences, each covering the whole country, based on theology including perspectives on LGBTQ ministry (i.e. progressive, unity, and traditional) (note: see page 50 of the report for a full description).*

- *Cross-connectional conference cooperation, relationships, and partnerships in mission and ministry continue as they do now, at the initiative of the entities involved. All connectional conferences would continue to support mission work and sustain ministry in the areas outside the U.S.*

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- *Each connectional conference elects and (in the U.S.) pays for its own bishops. Bishops outside the U.S. would continue to be supported by all U.S. annual conferences.*

- *Each connectional conference would create its own Book of Discipline, which would begin with The General Book of Discipline, including Articles of Religion, Confessions of Faith, the General Rules and other items that are commonly agreed upon by United Methodists. Each connectional conference also has the authority to adapt those items not included in The General Book of Discipline.*

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- *Each connectional conference has its own policies regarding LGBTQ weddings and ordination.*

- *Each connectional conference sets its own standards for ministerial credentialing and list of approved schools/seminaries.*

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- *Local churches may choose to align with a connectional conference different from the one decided by their Annual Conference. [ Annual Conferences pick which connectional conference in which they want to belong. ]*

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- *Clergy will choose to affiliate with a connectional conference. Some clergy may make themselves available to serve in more than one connectional conference. In order to serve in a connectional conference, a clergy person will need to agree to meet the qualifications of the connectional conference and maintain the standards of conduct as set forth by the connectional conference they are serving.*

#### **(4) The Traditionalist Plan**

This plan was presented to the Commission just prior to their last meeting by groups within the UMC identifying themselves as conservative and traditionalist. Their primary concern is that The Disciple be rigorously adhered to and all clergy within the UMC (including and especially bishops) be held accountable for any violations of church law. This is a reaction to

- the occasional failure to uphold prohibitions against ordination of practicing homosexuals to the clergy, and
- the performance of same-sex weddings by some UM clergy.

The Traditionalist Plan requires strict obedience to The Disciple but provides that should a clergyperson, church, or annual conference refuse to uphold its requirements, then they may separate from the UMC and join a denomination separate from the UMC and no longer identify themselves as United Methodist. In other words, the Traditionalist Plan would split the UMC.