

United Methodist Church “The Way Forward”  
The Council of Bishops  
May 2018  
Bishop Peggy A. Johnson

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church says:  
Paragraph 161g

“The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Ordained Ministry – Paragraph 304.3

“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

Marriage – Paragraph 161c

“We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between **a man and a woman**. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of **one man and one woman**.”

Unauthorized Conduct – Paragraph 341.6

“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.”

Chargeable Offenses – Paragraph 2702.1 (a) (b)

“A clergy member...may be tried when charged with one or more of the following offenses (a) immorality including but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not faithful in a heterosexual marriage, (b) practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings, including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies...”

Since 1972...

These paragraphs have been debated and voted again and again

At every General Conference since, these paragraphs have been challenged but in general they have stayed the same with the exception of some additions about “God’s grace is available for all” “we implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbians and gay members and friends.”

General Conference , Portland, Oregon, May 10-20, 2016

The Bishops’ “commission for the way forward” was created

All legislation regarding homosexuality was suspended

A commission of 32 people was created to study the issue in depth and bring to the bishops a plan

The commission consists of a wide variety of diversity: ethnically, gender, orientation, theological, lay and clergy

The creation of the commission passed by 23 votes

Vision of the commission

To design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of the UM **witness** in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much **contextual differentiation as possible** and balances an approach to different theological understanding of human sexuality with a desire for as much **unity** as possible.

Vision of the commission

...This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition”

Process

Undergirded with an intentional and global prayer effort

Study of the scriptures

Presentations by theologians, historians, financial leaders, other denominations

Hearing from agencies, boards, churches

Much conversation and sharing of hearts and perspectives

Meetings

The Commission has met 8 times and has scheduled 1 more meeting.

The Commission worked together with a “Covenant of Accountability” of respect, prayer, study, hospitality, and confidentiality

The Commission brought their proposals to the Council of Bishops for their consideration and direction

The Commission presented three plans to the COB

**Traditionalist Plan** – keep the Discipline the same and include more accountabilities

**One Church Plan** – remove all of the language from the Discipline around homosexuality and same gender weddings and allow for conferences and churches to follow their conscience in their context

**Connectional Conference Plan** – have shared services but create three connections: traditional, justice and contextual with jurisdictions deciding which to join.

Council of Bishops meeting makes a recommendation

April 29-May 4, 2018

Chicago, Illinois

There was much prayer, conversation, voting and deliberation

They decided on the following statement:

**“Having received and considered the extensive work of the Commission on a Way Forward, the COB will submit a report to the special session of the General Conference in 2019 that includes:**

All three plans (Traditionalist, One Church and Connectional Conference) for a way forward considered by the Commission and the Council

**The Council’s recommendation of the One Church Plan**

A historical narrative of the Council’s discernment process regarding all three plans”

Rationale

In order to invite the Church to go deeper into the journey the COB and the Commission have been on, the COB makes all the information considered by the Commission and the COB available to the delegates of the GC and acknowledges there is support for each of the three plans within the Council. The values of our global church are reflected in all three plans. The majority of the COB recommends the One Church Plan as the best way forward for The United Methodist Church

## Why the preference for the one church plan?

- It allows for contextualization of language about human sexuality in support of the mission
- It allows for central conferences, especially those in Africa, to retain traditional language and values
- It best fulfills the vision of a global and multi-cultural Church in order to maximize our mission and achieve as much unity as possible.
- It keeps the constitution and the structure and agencies intact
- It does not force anyone to act out of their conscience
- It received the overwhelming majority in the COB
- It has the most space, clarity, grace, context and simplicity
- It takes out the language from the Discipline about homosexuality and same gender weddings and allows churches and pastors to decide about weddings and boards of ordained ministry and conferences to decide about ordination

## Why include the Traditionalist and Connectional Conference Plan?

- We want to honor the values in these models
- We want to be transparent – there are diverse hopes and passions across our church

### Traditionalist model

Affirms the current Book of Discipline language about homosexuality, ordination and same gender marriages/unions

Places a high value on accountability

### Connectional Conference Plan

Has one “core” that includes shared doctrine and services (pensions, UMCOR, missions)

Creates different “branches” that have clearly defined values

These values include: accountability, contextualization and justice

There may be an additional “branch” if the Central Conferences wish to create one

It requires 7 changes to the Constitution

### Time line

- The documents will be translated now into 10 international languages and will be available by July 8, 2018
- The Judicial Council will rule in May as to whether any other business than this issue before us can be brought to GC
- We will discuss the One Church Plan at Annual Conference (no voting)
- There will be town hall meetings on each district in the fall
- Delegation members will gather people for conversation as well
- Sept. 22 – the NEJ delegations will be meeting for instructions and conversation
- The Judicial Council will meet again in October for their regular meeting and will review the 2019 GC documents
- General Conference will be held in St. Louis, MO – February 23-26, 2019. The result of that vote goes into effect immediately.

### Gracious exit

- Churches that consider exiting the denomination are still subject to the trust clause of the denomination with regards to property and assets.
- This assure the continuation of the pension liabilities
- The attitude in all exit conversations should be centered in grace and civility
- The autonomous church option is part of the historical narrative but not included in the bishops’ recommendation

## Special General Conference

- There will be 864 delegates – (½ lay and ½ clergy) from the entire denomination
- 42% of the voting delegates are from countries other than the US
- 30% of the delegates are from the continent of Africa
- The majority of the US delegates are from the southeast and south central jurisdictions
- Eastern PA has 8 delegates, Pen Del has 4 delegates

## What do we do in the meantime?

- Be an unanxious presence
- Have conversations, prayer meetings, Bible study (resources are on conference websites)
- Join our special prayer emphasis: Pray every day from 2:23 pm to 2:26 pm (and a.m. if you are up late). These are the dates of the General Conference in February.
- Engage in the Wesley Fast (after dinner on Thursday until noon on Friday)
- Have an attitude of “Convicted Humility”

## Convicted Humility

This is an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of correction. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape for faithfulness together. In that spirit, we wish to lift up our sacred core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement and ground our search for wisdom and holiness.

## Attend a town hall meeting in Pen Del or EPA

9/12 – Easton

9/13 – Salisbury

9/18 – Wilmington

9:19 – Dover

9/24 – East

9/25 – South

9/27 – West

10/1 – North (East)

10/3 – North (West)

Each meeting will begin at 6:30 pm

## Most importantly: continue the mission of the church:

Make disciples of Jesus Christ

Transform the world in mission outreach

Develop new faith communities

Re-develop declining churches

Encourage and train new leaders

Be in ministry with the poor

Improve global health