

## **DISTRICT DAYS | FALL 2018**

### **I. Preface**

It seems that most of the emphasis of our work as a denomination is focused on the Special Called Session of General Conference scheduled for February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, MO.

However, our focus here in New York has been on a couple of different levels:

**EXPLAIN/WALK THROUGH THE MISSION/VISION/CORE VALUES.**

This is our emphasis and we dare not let anything derail us from the critical work of transforming lives, equipping leaders for excellence, and assisting congregations in a journey toward vitality.

The pre-game hype related to the Special Session has caused many to ask me, "What do you think is going to happen?" I have never employed these three words more than I have the last several months. "I DON'T KNOW."

Here's what I do know:

- On February 27, I will be a United Methodist Christian, I will be a bishop in the church, and I will be here in New York to help us walk through and make decisions based on whatever happens at the Special Session.

The report being considered and acted upon by the delegates to this session has been discerned by a committee called the Commission on the Way Forward. This Commission was formed near the end of the 2016 General Conference in Portland, OR as a way to deal with the ongoing controversy and disagreements surrounding the church's position on human sexuality.

This report is offered in the context of a global church, consisting of 12 million members, on four continents, in the four official languages of the church. These complexities are challenging but the report is offered acknowledging those realities.

### **II. The Commission on a Way Forward**

The Commission is a group of 32 persons who have been brought together from all areas and walks of life to find a way forward. The Commission's purpose was never to arrive at uniformity of thoughts. Their purpose was to help the General Conference do the work of decision making. While the Commission members did not have full agreement with everything in the report, they did agree to keep the work moving forward for the benefit of the whole church.

The Commission had a common Mission, Vision & Scope

- a. Mission  
Bringing together persons deeply committed to the future of the UMC with an openness to develop new relationships with one another and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination.
- b. Vision

To design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of our UM 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.

c. Scope

Being open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality. We should consider new ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions.

### III. **The Historical Context (1968 to Today)**

In this our 50<sup>th</sup> year as a denomination, we can look back and see that the denomination first added the following phrase concerning homosexuality to the Book of Discipline in 1972: *“Further, we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured, though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”*

For the last 44 years, the church has struggled with the implications of this phrase. In 2012, the General Conference could not even agree to add a phrase that simply said, “we acknowledge that we are not of one mind on this matter.”

As the years have passed, there has been not only a growing frustration over the constant debate, but there have been actions that have increased harm to one another, as well as a deepening impasse related to human sexuality and the unity of the church (see document).

Near the end of the 2016 General Conference session in Portland, Oregon, there was a clear conversation and movement related to schism in the church. As an intercessory measure, the General Conference narrowly approved a motion to ask the bishops to provide a potential solution to the impasse. As a result, the Commission on the Way Forward was formed and the Special Session to the General Conference was called to consider the report from the Commission.

### IV. **Key Foundational Ideas**

a. A Common Core

We share a common core based on our creeds, articles of religion, the General Rules, our Wesleyan hymns, our emphasis on scripture, our belief in works of piety/mercy/justice, our sacraments, our accountability through class meetings/small groups, our polity (superintendency, itineracy, conferencing), our work in mission across the globe, and our belief in the saving, justifying, and sanctifying grace of God.

b. The Need for Space

Because of the great harm we have done to one another and the reality that we have what seems to be irreconcilable differences, there is need for more distinct space between constituencies in our church.

c. Centralization & De-Centralization

Centralization brings order and clarity to our work together but it can contribute to stagnancy and suppression (keeping things just the way they are). De-centralization provides freedom & contextualization but it can create chaos and confusion.

Key Question: *Which direction does our present situation call us to lean?*

d. Traditionalist, Contextual & Progressive Values

- Traditionalists value marriage between one man and one woman and sexual activity within this relationship.
- Contextualists want to translate the gospel into the varied settings in which God places us. They believe it is our missional calling and believe that the work of the church must be adapted in a global church.
- Progressives value full inclusion of all persons in the life of the church at every level, including the LGBTQI community. They also believe the church can celebrate same-gender marriage.

e. Learning to be a Global Church

We can aspire to understand and live from our worldwide nature but it involves listening, humility, and crossing of boundaries of geography, language, and culture to understand how faith and culture shapes practice.

f. Definitions of Unity

Our unity is in Jesus Christ: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. When we cannot live in unity with one another, our witness is compromised and we end up hurting each other.

g. Maximizing our Mission

We are a church that exists on four (4) continents all under the cross & flame. To maximize our mission is to fulfill the Great Commission (go and make disciples) and the Great Commandment (love God/love one another) in as many places in the world as possible.

This mission, however, is sometimes compromised when a higher value is placed on satisfying constituent groups that exist in the church rather than going into the world.

h. An Anatomy of Peace & Ways of Being with Each Other.

The condition of our heart very much shapes outcomes. If we have a heart at peace, we see the other as a person with needs, hopes, and gifts. If we have a heart of war, we see the other as an object or as an obstacle to our own desires and visions. A heart at war exaggerates the differences between persons. To come to grips with what it means to love one another despite our differences enables us to see what we have in common: our biblical understandings, our love for the church, and our common mission to reach the world with the transforming power of God.

i. Praying our Way Forward

- Begin praying each day from 2:23 p.m. – 2:26 p.m., the numbers which correspond with the dates of February 23-26, 2019.

## V. **Theological Framework**

- a. An Ecumenical Church (Acts 2; John 3; Genesis 1,3)
- b. Grace & Holiness (Romans 5, Mark 12)
- c. Connection & Mission (Philippians 2, Matthew 28)
- d. A Convicted Humility (I Corinthians 12-14)

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 corrections. 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 of faithfulness together.

## VI. **Missional Framework**

- a. Unity in Mission
- b. Requirements:
  - a. Humility
  - b. Contextuality
  - c. Creativity
  - d. Flexibility
  - e. Mutuality
  - f. Generosity

### **The Three Plans Proposed by the Commission**

#### I. **The One Church Plan**

##### General Statements

- 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 UMC.
- No Annual Conference, bishop, congregation, or pastor would be compelled to act contrary to their convictions.
- Maintains the current structure of the UMC
- There is no mandate to participate in a vote that divides, segments, or separates.
- Upholds a unity of mission without uniformity of practice.
- Gives traditionalists space to continue to offer ministry as they have
- Gives progressives space to exercise freely a more complete ministry with the LGBTQI community.
- Enables us all to continue to coexist without disrupting ministry.

##### Specifics

- It removes the language from the BOD used in the U.S. that restricts pastors and churches from conducting same-gender wedding and annual conferences from ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexual persons.
- It adds language that protects the religious freedom of pastors, churches, and who choose not to perform/host same-sex weddings and bishops who choose not to credential/ordain self-avowed practicing homosexual persons.
- It ends the threat of church trials.

- Each jurisdiction would support the costs of their own bishops/offices.

### Theological/Biblical Foundations

- I Corinthians 9:20-23
- It acknowledges that practices among vital congregations need room to thrive depending on their mission field.
- It has listened to those from all sides that have asked for more space.
  - Too much space challenges the unity of the church by risking further separation in our connection.
  - Little or no space will lead us to enforce uniformity in ways that could continue our impasse.
- This plan is built on the belief that it is possible to live with more space while we focus on our common mission.

### The Perils of Division

- Is it the will of God for a community of believers who share a common heritage, doctrine, and ministry to divide?
- Historically, the common desire to alleviate suffering and address injustice in the world has been a focus of unity for our diverse denomination.

### The Effects of the One Church Plan

#### *The Local Church*

- Not required to vote. Most likely, no changes would occur.
- It minimizes disruption and gives freedom to churches to adapt in order to minister to the LGBTQI community in their context.

#### *Clergy*

- Clergy would have the freedom to exercise individual conscience.
- Clergy who are uncomfortable with new policies established and/or affirmed in their current Annual Conference will be supported in their desire to transfer.

#### *Annual Conferences*

- No Annual Conference would have to vote on this matter.
- The bishop and cabinet would continue to use clergy and church profiles to understand the context/need of each local church in making appointments.

#### *Council of Bishops/General Agencies/UMC Related Institutions*

- Remains in their current form.

#### *Financial & Pension Considerations*

- It has few financial and pension considerations.
- If churches choose to leave the UMC, there would be implications to long-term pension liability.

#### *Constitutional Amendments needed for this Plan*

- None

*Implementation Plan*

- Can take effect on January 1, 2020

The Effects of the One Church Plan

- There is an old phrase in the business world: *“Don’t let perfect stand in the way of good.”* This is not a perfect plan. It has holes in it/downsides to it. But it is a step. And without a step, we cannot get to the ultimate goal.
- In my own life, when I have set an ultimate goal, let’s say a “10,” and I’m currently at a “2,” if I get to “6” or “7”, that might be better than if I set my goal at a “5” and only reached a “3” or a “4.” Our goal is a “10,” but to get there we may have to make a step, in order to get there.

**II. The Conference Connectional Plan**Summary

- It reflects a unified core that includes shared doctrine and services.
- It creates three values-based connectional conferences that have distinct definitions of accountability, contextualization, and justice
- It redefines the Council of Bishops (ecumenical and shared learning group).

Features

- Five jurisdictions are replaced by three connectional conferences based on theology.
  - Progressive, unity, and traditional
- All would continue to support mission work and sustain ministry in areas outside the U.S.
- General Conference would have the authority over shared doctrine and shared agencies
- Continuing agencies: Wespath, Publishing House, GCFA, Archives/History and parts of GBGM.
- Each conference would elect and pay for its own bishops.
- Each conference would create its own Book of Discipline
- The Judicial Council would remain with two persons from each connectional conference.
- Each conference would have its own policies regarding human sexuality issues.
- Each conference would set its own standards for ministerial credentialing.

Implementation

- Jurisdictional Conferences would have the first level of voting concerning affiliation.
- Annual Conferences that disagree may decide to affiliate with a different conference.
- No local church would be required to vote unless it decides to join a conference other than its own.
- Jurisdictions would cease to exist.
- A Standing Committee on Connectional Conferences would be formed.

- General Conference 2024 would be delayed until 2025 for implementation purposes

### Theological & Biblical Foundations

- Contextuality
  - The church is called to embody and spread divine love in diverse social, cultural, economic, political, and national contexts.
- Freedom of Conscience before God
- The plan emphasizes connection to Christ, while acknowledging the reality of different connectional conferences growing in different directions with different emphases and understandings.

### Missional Understanding

- By providing a place for a variety of perspectives, this plan diffuses the conflicts about human sexuality that beset our church. Persons will be able to serve in a place in the church where their perspective is honored and followed.

### The Effects of the One Church Plan

#### *The Local Church*

- The plan seeks to maximize our ability to reach and be in ministry from a variety of theological perspectives
- Local churches may choose to align with a connectional conference different from the one decided by their Annual Conference.
- The Cabinet would administer a process alongside a local church to affiliate with a connectional conference other than the one adopted by their Annual Conference (majority vote).

#### *Clergy*

- Clergy will choose to affiliate with a connectional conference. Some may make themselves available for more than one.
- BOOM would hold clergy accountable for their actions while in a connectional conference.
- Clergy ordination in one connectional conference would be recognized by all there but ability to serve is determined by compliance to the standards of the one they align with.

#### *Annual Conferences*

- Annual Conferences can vote on which branch to align with.
- Re-voting on the alignment would be limited to once every four years.

#### *Council of Bishops/General Agencies/UMC Related Institutions*

- Each bishop will choose a connectional conference to align with.
- Some bishops may make themselves available for more than one.
- General agencies would be limited to the ones listed above.
- Additional program agencies would be determined by each connectional conference.

#### *Financial & Pension Considerations*

- There will be legal fees to understand legacy connections

- Wespeth would stay intact but would be re-framed to cover all three connectional conferences.
- If churches choose to leave the UMC, there would be implications to long-term pension liability.

#### *Constitutional Amendments needed for this Plan*

- There are multiple (20+) constitutional amendments that would need approved for this plan to be implemented.

#### *Implementation*

- Constitutional amendment voting
- 2020 General Conference
- Jurisdictional and/or Annual Conference voting on alignment.
- Full implementation would not take place until 2025.

### III. **The Traditionalist Plan**

#### Summary

- This plan has a primary objective accountability to the current Book of Discipline language.
- It operates under the pre-supposition that the UMC ought to have one unified moral stance on the issues of marriage and sexuality.
- It acknowledges the deep conscientious objections on the part of some to the current stance and practices of the church.
- It broadens the definition of self-avowed practicing homosexual to include persons living in a same-sex marriage or civil union or persons who publicly state that they are practicing homosexuals.
- Mandate that any just resolution in a complaint process include a commitment to not repeat the offense.
- Annual Conferences, local churches, clergy, and bishops who could not comply would be encouraged to join or form an “autonomous, affiliated, or concordant church.”

#### The Effects

##### *Local Church*

- No requirement to vote.
- Local churches that could not comply could leave, or if an Annual Conference chooses to leave, could vote to remain United Methodist.

##### *Clergy*

- Those who could not maintain the current standards would be encouraged to leave.
- Mandate that any just resolution shall include a commitment to not repeat the offense.
- Clergy would surrender credentials if found guilty of breaking any provisions.
- Clergy who do not conform to the provisions related to their identity as self-avowed, practicing homosexuals or performance of same-gender weddings would be expected to leave.

*Annual Conferences*

- Annual Conferences that do not comply would be encouraged to form their own church, could no longer use the cross & flame, and would no longer receive funds from the UMC.

*Bishops*

- Bishops who do not comply would be encouraged to join the “autonomous, affiliated or concordate church” formed by the annual conferences that have split.

*Jurisdictions, General Agencies, The Council of Bishops*

- All would remain the same.

Theological & Biblical Foundations

The unity of Christ's church has, for the last 1000 years often taken different forms.

Mission

This model provides freedom for progressive pastors, churches, and conferences to evangelize persons who they believe would best be reached by a form of Methodism that is fully inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities. At the same time, it provides assurances that traditional United Methodists can continue to make disciples among people who value traditional teaching on marriage and sexual behavior.

Financial & Pension Implications

If churches choose to leave the UMC, there would be implications to long-term pension liability. If Annual Conferences leave they would need to remain legally responsible for their pension liabilities, as a plan sponsor, in a manner sequestered from the remainder of the clergy pension plan.

**CLOSING**

The pre-game hype related to the Special Session has caused many to ask me, “What do you think is going to happen?” I have never employed these three words more than I have the last several months. “I DON'T KNOW.”

Here's what I do know:

- On February 27, I will be a United Methodist Christian, I will be a bishop in the church, and I will be here in New York to help us walk through and make decisions based on whatever happens at the Special Session.

**A PARTING THOUGHT**

*“You have been assigned this storm to show others that it can be navigated.” -Sue Nelson Kibbey*

*May it be so! Amen.*