

## Detailed History and Future Options

### Pastoral Letter

#### A Brief History of Division Within the UMC

Tracing its history to John Wesley and the early Methodist movement in Britain as well as the first official Methodist Church in America, the Methodist Episcopal Church, The United Methodist Church officially formed in 1968. The UMC was the product of a merger between The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. This merger was a momentous and celebrated occasion that represented a new era of Methodism with a vision of being a “big tent” denomination for people of the Wesleyan tradition across the globe.

Four years later, at the 1972 General Conference, the clear divides within the newly formed denomination began to appear. It was at this conference that The UMC adopted the current Book of Discipline language that states homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. However, the church’s adoption of this language in 1972 did not preclude the General Conference from returning to the debate when it met every four years. It wasn’t until 1984 that the incompatibility language of homosexuality was added to the standard requirements for those pursuing ministry in The UMC. This addition stated that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” were not eligible to be candidates for ministry. A cursory examination of General Conference proceedings from 1972 to today shows an ongoing and repetitive struggle between those committed to upholding the stance adopted by General Conference in 1972 and those who are committed to removing restrictive language related to human sexuality.

The current divisions and disagreements present in The UMC can be traced to the actions of the 2016 General Conference and the subsequent events. Convening in Portland, Oregon, General Conference debates surrounding The UMC’s stance on human sexuality once again bubbled to the surface. After extensive and contentious debate, a request from the floor was made to the Council of Bishops. The request asked for the debate to be suspended and for the bishops to lead in a time of clear division within the church. The Council of Bishops heeded this request and promised to report back to the General Conference after a time of internal discernment. After an evening of discussion, the Council of Bishops returned to the General Conference and proposed the creation of “The Commission on a Way Forward.” This Commission would be comprised of individuals selected by the Council of Bishops who represented the entire spectrum of theological belief within The UMC on the topic of human sexuality. The Commission would meet regularly to discuss potential avenues for moving the church forward on this contentious topic. Any work that was done would be reported back to the General Conference at a special or regularly called session of General Conference. Thus, this commission would be empowered by the General Conference to have the difficult conversations that were necessary to move the denomination forward. The proposal by the Council of Bishops was passed by the General Conference and its work commenced soon thereafter.

The Commission met regularly over the next few years to have difficult conversations about the future of The United Methodist Church. The result of this work was three potential plans for the General Conference to consider. These three plans were 1) The One Church Plan, 2) The Connectional Conference Plan, and 3) The Traditional Plan. The One Church Plan would have removed the language

from the Book of Discipline forbidding clergy and churches from conducting same-sex marriages as well as the language forbidding the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. At the same time, it would have added language intentionally protecting the religious freedoms of pastors, churches, and annual conferences that chose to not bless same-sex marriages or that chose to not ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals. In essence, each church, pastor, and conference, would have the freedom to decide their own theological stance and local practice as it relates to the topic of human sexuality. The Connectional Conference Plan would have replaced the current denominational structure of The UMC with at least (3) "Connectional" conferences. These conferences would be differentiated by their theological stance as it relates to human sexuality (progressive, traditional, and centrist). Pastors, churches, and annual conferences would have the ability to choose the conference with which they would want to affiliate. This plan redefined what it meant to be united and attempted to provide space for differing opinions while maintaining an essentially Wesleyan core. The third option, the Traditional Plan, had the central purpose of creating accountability to the current Book of Discipline language regarding human sexuality. Among many things, this plan would enhance the Book of Discipline language as it relates to human sexuality and require annual conferences and bishops to certify that they would uphold and enforce Book of Disciplines standards of such. This plan would increase accountability measures for the purpose of enforcement. Likewise, those that disagreed with the stance of The UMC, whether as a church or as an individual clergy person, would be provided avenues for withdrawal to join an autonomous, affiliated, or concordant church.

When the Commission concluded their work, they presented the plans before the Council of Bishops. In turn, the Council of Bishops called for a special session of the General Conference to be convened in 2019 for the purpose of considering the report and acting on the work of the Commission. The conference was held in February of 2019 in St. Louis. During the four-day session, the merits of each plan were fiercely debated, and the future of the church was prayed over. Ultimately, the General Conference passed the Traditional Plan, which maintained the Book of Discipline language regarding human sexuality. However, because of time constraints, not every piece of legislation related to the Traditional Plan passed.

In the aftermath of the special session of General Conference, people from across The UMC who disagreed with the decision began to take action. Many of the individuals who disagreed with the decision of General Conference made clear that they would continue to fight for the removal of the language regarding human sexuality. In the North Georgia Conference alone, many clergy who disagreed with the decision took out a full-page advertisement in the Atlanta Journal Constitution apologizing for the actions of General Conference and promising to work for change. In the weeks and months following the special session of General Conference, it became clear that the disagreements had not been resolved and the church was as divided as ever. Tensions were high in preparation for the regularly scheduled General Conference in May of 2020.

In the time between the 2019 and 2020 General Conference, leaders from across the global connection made a decision to come to the negotiation table. Led by the late Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone, traditional and progressive leaders met to consider a plan for amicable separation between those who supported the traditional plan and those who desired to see the language regarding human sexuality changed. Famous mediator Kenneth Feinberg helped facilitate the discussions. After serious negotiations, those involved in the mediation agreed to "The Protocol and Grace through

Separation.” The Protocol, as it came to be called, was seen as a potential path for those with fundamental disagreements to bless each other and part ways. Among many things, The Protocol agreement would eradicate all of the “incompatibility” language from The UMC Book of Discipline. Furthermore, it would facilitate the creation of a traditional and evangelical Methodist denomination. Churches and clergy who wanted to align with this other Methodist denomination would have been given the freedom to do such under a temporary suspension of the trust clause. Traditional minded and progressive minded individuals across the denomination supported The Protocol. While not perfect for everyone, it was viewed as a reasonable compromise to end the decades long hostility.

As you know, the world was thrown into upheaval in March of 2020 by the COVID-19 virus. Due to the global pandemic, the 2020 General Conference was postponed until 2021. By 2021, it became apparent that the General Conference would not be able to meet, and it was again postponed until 2022. In the early months of 2022, the Commission on General Conference (the committee of the church responsible for planning and implementing the General Conference) made the decision to once again postpone General Conference to 2024. This decision to postpone General Conference once again exposed the deep divisions and divide between those who wished to uphold the Discipline’s language on sexuality and those who disagreed with the language. While it is difficult to always paint with such a wide brush, progressive minded Methodists tended to applaud the decision of the Commission on General Conference as the right and just action in light of the ongoing pandemic and the difficulty for people outside the US to receive COVID-19 vaccinations and visas in time for the gathering. Traditionally minded Methodists maintained the decision to postpone was political and pointed to lower COVID-19 infection rates across the globe and the inaction of the General Conference to help international delegates receive access to vaccines and schedule visa appointments in a timely manner as evidence. Likewise, they viewed the global gatherings of international bodies as an indictment on United Methodist leadership.

The decision to postpone the General Conference from 2022 to 2024 precipitated the announcement that the Global Methodist Church would be launching on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. The Global Methodist Church had previously announced their intentions to form upon the meeting of General Conference and the hopeful passage of the Protocol language. The Global Methodist Church was prepared to receive churches and clergy that wanted to be aligned with a traditionally minded, Wesleyan, and evangelical denomination. However, according to The Global Methodist Church, the decision to postpone to 2024 necessitated an earlier launch out of concerns that the Protocol might not be adopted by the General Conference.

As you can see, the division and disagreement within the church is a vastly layered. From this brief history, you can also see that tension and divide in The UMC since its inception has most often reared its head in the debate over the church’s teachings on the ordination of individuals who self-identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and same-sex marriages. However, it is important to note that these debates are a part of a much larger divide over the nature and mission of the church. Current arguments over human sexuality are symptoms of a larger divide over fundamental theological and institutional issues. Whatever the cause of these issues, the fractured nature of our global denomination is not in question.

## Assumptions

Our entire conversation assumes several key points....

- The Conversation must be had
- Wesleyan in Tradition
- Connectional in Nature

## Why Have This Conversation Now?

As a part of the work done by the 2019 General Conference, a disaffiliation plan was added to The UMC Book of Discipline. If you didn't know, in The United Methodist Church, each local congregation holds their property in Trust for the Bishop and Annual Conference. In other words, local congregations do not own their local property. This disaffiliation plan (BOD Paragraph 2553) gives congregations that want to leave the denomination over disagreements related to human sexuality the ability to do so if certain criteria are met. Some of the criteria are financial and some of them are procedural. An important part of this paragraph, though, is the inclusion of a sunset clause. The terms of paragraph 2553 are no longer viable after December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023. This means that churches wanting to disaffiliate from The UMC over matters of conscious related to human sexuality are only guaranteed the ability to do so with property through that date.

Ultimately, as is hopefully clear, the decision to remain a part of The UMC or to disaffiliate and join another Wesleyan denomination (like the GMC) falls solely on the members of Due West. Many of you may wonder: why would it not be beneficial to wait until 2024 and hope for the passage of The Protocol? And to be clear, the terms for exiting the denomination under The Protocol are certainly preferable to those available under paragraph 2553. However, it is not clear whether The Protocol has a viable chance to be passed at the 2024 General Conference. Many Methodists around the globe do not believe that The Protocol will be passed in 2024 – and that is evidenced by the recently announced intention of the Global Methodist Church to officially launch in May of 2022. Likewise, with the sunset clause that is included in the current disaffiliation plan, it is not clear whether the disaffiliation plan currently set forth in The Book of Discipline would be renewed. Because of all of this, it is clear that we as a church must have this conversation now. Because, if it is ultimately determined that the will and desire of the church is to disaffiliate, the only time that we can be guaranteed the ability to do that is now.

## **Pro-UMC Links to Information**

- The United Methodist Church Website – <https://umc.org>
  - The UMC recently launched a campaign titled #BeUMC. This hashtag encourages individuals to share their stories about the impact of The UMC in their life and their reasoning for choosing to remain a part of the UMC. The hashtag can be searched on any social media platform. A collection of these stories, as well as the ability to share your own, can be found at <https://umc.org/beumc>.
- The UMC Council of Bishop - “A Narrative for the Continuing United Methodist Church”  
[www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/websites/www/a+narrative+for+the+continuing+united+methodist+church....pdf](http://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/websites/www/a+narrative+for+the+continuing+united+methodist+church....pdf)
- UMCNext - <https://umcnext.com/>

- UMCNext is a coalition of United Methodist leaders committed to the continued mission of The UMC. A list of their core commitments is listed on the website.
- The UMCNext coalition submitted a group of petitions to the 2020 General Conference titled “UMC Next Generation.” This set of petitions can be found at this link: <https://umcnext.com/legislation/#:~:text=The%20Next%20Generation%20UMC%20legislation,discriminates%20against%20our%20LGBTQ%20siblings.>
- Out of Chaos...Creation - <https://www.umc-outofchaos.org/>
  - This group is committed to The UMC and recognize that the church is at a crossroads. Their website states that they hope to use this time “provided by the postponement of General Conference to imagine a new way of conferencing and a new vision.”
  - This group created a vision plan for their hopes in The UMC titled “Out of Chaos, Creation: Imagining A Better Way of Being United Methodists.” This document can be found here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ece9a1d3e465434702ee8ba/t/602f1ed0630a906ee6072fc7/1613700817982/OOC+EN+Final+Official.pdf>
- Reconciling Ministries Network - <https://rmnetwork.org/>
  - According to their website, Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) “equips and mobilizes United Methodists of all sexual orientations and gender identities to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. The language of our mission comes from the United Methodist baptismal vow, and that’s our charge. Simply put, we work to advance justice and inclusion for all LGBTQ people in The United Methodist Church and beyond.”
  - RMN released a statement following the postponement of General Conference to 2024. You can find that statement here: <https://rmnetwork.org/2022/03/03/regarding-postponement-of-general-conference-to-2024/>

### Pro-GMC Links to Information

- The Global Methodist Church Website – <https://globalmethodist.org>
  - The Global Methodist Church regularly posts articles related to the formation of the new denomination. In an article dated March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the process for congregations to join the GMC is outlined. This only outlines how churches would join the GMC and does not outline the prerequisite process of choosing to disaffiliate with The UMC. This article can be found here: <https://globalmethodist.org/the-process-for-congregations-to-join-the-global-methodist-church/>
- The Wesleyan Covenant Association - <https://wesleyancovenant.org/>
  - According to their website, “The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) connects Spirit-filled, Orthodox churches, clergy, and laity who hold to Wesleyan theology. It is an association of individuals and congregations who share a common understanding of our Wesleyan doctrine and a desire to become a vibrant, faithful, growing 21<sup>st</sup> century church. “
  - The WCA released an article upon the announcement of the Global Methodist Church’s intention to form. It interviews several of the 17 members of the Global Methodist

Church's Transitional Leadership Council.

<https://wesleyan covenant.org/2021/02/26/the-global-methodist-church/>

- Good News Magazine - <https://goodnewsmag.org/>
  - Good News Magazine identifies itself as “the classical evangelical witness and ministry for renewal and reform within The United Methodist Church.”
  - Rob Renfro, the President of Good News Magazine, responds to the postponement of General Conference in this video. Their website states that “The Good News Board of Directors fully endorses the formation of the Global Methodist Church” and in his response, Renfro encourages traditionally minded churches to leave The UMC. You can find the video here: <https://goodnewsmag.org/2022/03/14/246347/>
- The Confessing Movement - <https://www.confessingumc.org/>
  - The Confessing Movement understands itself as existing “to help The United Methodist Church retrieve and celebrate its classic doctrinal identity and to live it out together as disciples of Jesus Christ.” While historically a renewal movement within The UMC, the Confessing Movement affirms the Global Methodist Church as the future of the Wesleyan movement.
  - The Confessing Movement publishes a podcast titled “Beliefs Matter.” This podcast, hosted by the president of The Confessing movement Rev. Dr. Maxie Dunham, shares insights from leaders in Christian orthodoxy and Wesleyan faith and practice. You can find the podcast here: <https://www.confessingumc.org/beliefs-matter-podcast>

### **Other Helpful Resources**

- Two Methodisms: A Comparison Chart (v. 1.5) - <https://peopleneedjesus.net/2021/05/24/two-methodisms-a-comparison-chart/comment-page-1/>
  - Created by Rev. Dr. Chris Ritter, a clergy person of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference of The UMC, this document seeks to compare The UMC and the GMC on major points of governing structure, and theology.