

Roundtable Discussions on General Conference 2019

**Resourced from Faith UMC, Montoursville*

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. [. . .] O righteous Father, the world doesn’t know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them.” (John 17:20-23, 25-26, NLT)

Context for the Commission on a Way Forward and General Conference 2019 Disagreement within the United Methodist Church

Within the United Methodist Church, there has been a decade’s long debate on the church’s official stance on the inclusion of LGBTQ persons within the denomination. On all sides of the discussion are Christians who love Jesus, who are passionate about making disciples of Jesus and who are connected in one church body. At the same time, they have significantly different convictions about how to interpret and apply scripture, reason, tradition, and experience to the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the church. The debate has taken significant energy within the denomination. Some Pastors, Annual Conferences, and Jurisdictions within the denomination have made the decision to not follow the Discipline’s prohibitions on marriage and ordination of pastors.

What happens when Christians in the same body disagree about an issue that elicits such strong reactions? What happens when the church is stuck in a cycle of debate and feels at a stalemate? What happens when the conflict between believers seems to become the main thing instead of the mission of making disciples? How do we find a way through the conflict while doing the least harm and prioritizing our mission of making disciples of Jesus?

These are the types of questions that the Commission on a Way Forward, the Council of Bishops, and General Conference 2019 are intended to address. If you want different results you have to try something different. This is why the General Conference voted to try a new process covered in prayer and to trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The goal is to find a way forward that changes the dynamic in the denomination and allows us to focus on our mission of making more disciples of Jesus Christ. The goal is to find a way that also does this with the least harm to the mission of individual congregations and is most effective at promoting unity in Christ.

*“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”
(Philippians 2: 1-4, NIV)*

The Focus of Tonight’s Meeting

There are two broad topics of discussion related to the current disagreement in the UMC.

1. Process in the United Methodist Church to Address our Disagreement and Scriptural Basis
2. Theological and Scriptural Understandings of Human Sexuality

These two topics are both important, and each one could be the content of multiple meetings and discussions. It is also true that trying to talk about both topics at the same time makes it more difficult to faithfully process either one. For the time that we have tonight, our focus will be #1. Our goal for tonight's meeting is that you leave with a clearer understanding of what is happening in the UMC. In order to do that we are going to do 3 things:

1. Overview of UMC organization and terms
2. Visualizing the positions of Christians within the UMC through the 'sugar packets' analogy
3. Understanding the Recommendation and Proposals headed to General Conference 2019

Overview of Commission on a Way Forward and General Conference 2019

The Commission on a Way Forward was proposed at the 2016 General Conference by the Council of Bishops "to do a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph of the Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and explore options that help to maintain and strengthen the unity of the church." The proposal was approved, and a 32-member commission was named in October of 2016. The commission was chosen to specifically represent the full spectrum of beliefs concerning human sexuality within the denomination. You can learn more about the commission here: <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward> The Bishops also called a Special Session of the General Conference to be held February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri limited to acting on the report from the Council "based on the recommendations of the Commission on a Way Forward."

In April of 2018 the Commission on a Way Forward met for a final time and presented their final report to the Bishops at a special May meeting. The Bishop's announced their recommendation. The recommendation in the form of legislation for General Conference 2019 will be released by July 2018.¹

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
(Ephesians 4: 1-6, NIV)

"Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works."

Sermon 39 Catholic Spirit by John Wesley

Visualizing the Positions of People in the United Methodist Church

To visualize the challenge, it is helpful to think objectively about the various positions of people within the church. There are more than just 2 positions. Many people have found it helpful to think about this in terms of 4 categories: Progressive non-compatibilist, Progressive compatibilist, Traditional compatibilist, and Traditional Non-compatibilist. Progressive and Traditional refer to whether their relative position on the issue. Compatibilist and non-compatibilist

¹¹ This summary of the commission's work from <http://greaternw.org/greater-northwest-area-invited-to-table-talks-to-discuss-a-way-forward-for-the-umc/>

refers to whether they feel they can be part of a denomination where others disagree with their stance on this one issue. Tom Berlin, a UMC pastor in Virginia has made this helpful video that helps us think about the issue from this lens. <http://revtomberlin.com/talking-about-lgbtq-inclusion-in-the-umc/#sthash.kdyUMGiy.dpbs>

Question:

What did you hear in the video that gave you a new or different perspective about the positions of people in the church, or your own position?

How does adding the idea of ‘compatibilist’ and ‘non-compatibilist’ change the conversation?

What values did you hear each of the 4 positions holds?

Three Options that the Commission has considered and the Recommended Plan²

Below are 3 plans that the Commission on a Way Forward developed as possible ways to allow United Methodists to focus on their mission making disciples of Jesus Christ. Under all the plans, congregations that did not want to remain in The United Methodist Church would be able to exit under terms not yet spelled out. At the May meeting of the Council of Bishops, they recommended the One Church Plan by majority vote of the Council. Because there were Bishops who also supported the other two plans, the Council of Bishops has decided to send all three plans as options to General Conference 2019. The plans are as follows:

Recommended Plan: The One Church Plan: Under this plan, the church as a whole chooses to acknowledge they do not agree and removes the language about the inclusion of LGBTQ persons from the Discipline. Each annual conference would be able to decide whether to ordain LGBTQ individuals as clergy. Each pastor would be able to decide whether to perform same-sex weddings or unions. Each local church would be able to decide whether to allow same-sex weddings in its sanctuary or receive an openly gay pastor. Those who could not in good conscience participate in same-sex weddings or ordination of LGBTQ clergy would not be required to do so. Central conferences — church regions in Africa, Europe and the Philippines — could maintain their own standards on ordination and marriage.

The Traditionalist Plan: This plan would leave the language in the Book of Discipline unchanged regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ persons. It would keep in place the prohibitions on same gender marriages, and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. The change would be to somehow strengthen the consequences for churches, pastors, and annual conferences who choose to not follow the Discipline in this area.

The Connectional Conference Plan: Under this plan, United Methodists would share doctrine, services and one Council of Bishops, while also creating different branches. Each branch would develop their own position on inclusion. The five U.S. jurisdictions would be replaced by **three connectional conferences**, each covering the whole country, based on theology and perspective on LGBTQ ministry — progressive, contextual and traditional branches. Contextual means allowing churches flexibility in ministry with LGBTQ people as best fits their mission field. Annual conferences would decide with which connectional conference to affiliate. Central conferences would remain as they are or could choose to affiliate with one of the three connectional conferences.

² Descriptions taken from news articles on <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward> , <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/delegates-early-thoughts-on-way-forward> , along with some additional information.

These are the three ways that the commission on a way forward has considered. In addition to these three plans, it is possible that delegates to the General Conference may make amendments or additional proposals during the 3 day conference.

Question:

How do these three plans speak to the values of each of the 4 positions shared by Tom Berlin?

UMC Definitions

General Conference:

No one person speaks for the United Methodist Church. The only body that can set official policy and speak for the denomination is the General Conference.

The General Conference is an international body of nearly 1,000 delegates that meets every four years. The delegates are elected by annual conferences (at annual conference sessions) to attend General Conference. They represent all annual conferences around the world. Half of the delegates are laity (non-clergy members), half are clergy.

Bishops attend the General Conference but cannot vote. Different bishops serve as presiding officers during the conference. Other bishops cannot speak unless permission is specifically granted by the delegates.

During General Conference, delegates discuss and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. These actions result in a revision of the Book of Discipline, the denomination's book of law, and Book of Resolutions, policies of the denomination on current social issues.

Book of Discipline:

A fundamental book outlining the law, doctrine, administration, organizational work and procedures of The United Methodist Church. Each General Conference amends The Book of Discipline, and the actions of the General Conference are reflected in the quadrennial revision. Often referred to as *The Discipline*.

Council of Bishops:

The Council of Bishops is made up of all active and retired bishops of The United Methodist Church. The Council meets twice a year. According to the Book of Discipline, "The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships." [427.2]

Bishops of The United Methodist Church provide spiritual leadership to almost 12 million persons in a broad range of settings on four continents, including North America, Europe, Africa and Asia. In the United Methodist tradition, bishops are not "ordained" as bishops, but are clergy elected and consecrated to the office of bishop.

Bishops are assigned to serve a geographical area for a four-year term. There are 46 episcopal areas in the United States and 20 episcopal areas outside of the U.S. Bishops and Episcopal Area Offices are grouped by Jurisdiction.

While the Bishop's speak to the Church and to the world, they do not have the authority to change the Book of Discipline. In fact, they do not have a vote at General Conference.