

A Way Forward

A special 4-page resource for local churches

In February 2019, The United Methodist Church will gather in St. Louis to choose a way forward as it seeks to create common ground on homosexuality. This is a critical moment in United Methodist history. “Even if nothing gets approved, we will have a different denomination on March 1,” said Bishop LaTrelle Easterling.

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciliation relationships with God, with others, and with self.¹ **The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.**

We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.³

H) Family Violence and Abuse—We recognize that family violence and abuse in all its forms—verbal, psychological, physical, sexual—is detrimental to the covenant of the human community. We encourage the Church to provide a safe environment, counsel,

HOLY CONFERRING IS a foundation of our United Methodist faith. As the church prepares for this Special Session of General Conference, several informational sessions have been held within the Baltimore-Washington Conference to share accurate information and to address people’s questions.

The Q&A below were gathered from sessions Bishop LaTrelle Easterling held on each of the four regions in the Baltimore-Washington Conference this fall and presentations by the Rev. Tom Lambrecht, a member of the Commission on a Way Forward and Vice President and General Manager of Good News, at Oakdale UMC Nov. 17, and by the Rev. Tom Salsgiver, a member of the Commission on the Way Forward, at Grace UMC in Gaithersburg Nov. 28.

? What is the UMC’s current stance on homosexuality?

The UMC affirms that all persons are individuals of sacred worth and that God’s grace is available to all. And that certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all people.

Currently, the denomination “does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Self-avowed, practicing homosexuals are not permitted to be ordained or appointed. Homosexual marriages

shall not be conducted by our ministry nor in our churches. The current rules are cited in the 2016 Book of Discipline in paragraphs 161F, 304.3, 341.6, 613.19, and 2702.1

For an overview, visit www.umc.org/what-we-believe/human-sexuality-backgrounder

? What is General Conference and how does it relate to the local church?

General Conference is the top policy-making body of The United Methodist Church and the only entity that speaks officially for the church. It normally meets every four years and is made up of 850 delegates representing the 12-million-member international denomination. The two-week sessions are a time of worship, holy conferencing and parliamentary proceedings. The policies and polity passed by General Conference are recorded in the Book of Discipline and the Book of Resolutions. The last time a Special Session was called was in 1970, to organize the union of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches.

? How did the Way Forward Commission begin?

At every General Conference since 1972, delegates have sought to change the “incompatible” language in the Book of Discipline. At the 2016 General Conference, there were an overwhelming

number of proposals dealing with issues surrounding same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy. The debate became increasingly divisive. In a vote, the bishops (who have neither voice nor vote at General Conference) were asked to step in and provide leadership.

The Council of Bishops created the Commission on a Way Forward and called upon its members to bring a plan that focused on “contextualization and unity” to a called three-day Special Session of General Conference, to be held in February 2019.

? Who was on the Commission and what did they produce?

The 32 members of the Commission were chosen by the Council of Bishops. It was a diverse group, with people from nine countries on all sides of the issue, including gay and lesbian members. It was charged with creating a way forward for the denomination that was contextual, offered space for as many people as possible and was faithful to the mission of The United Methodist Church.

The Commission worked for 18 months, meeting for a total of 26 days. In November 2017, it submitted three “sketches” to the Council of Bishops: the Traditional, One Church and Connectional Conference plans.

4 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

If you only have time to scratch the surface on the 2019 Special Session of General Conference, we invite you to read or watch the following:

1. “We Can Remain Together - Why I Support the One Church Plan”: A commentary by Bishop LaTrelle Easterling bwcumc.org/wecanremaintogether
2. “Finding Our Way Forward,” A BWC Resolution bwcumc.org/findingawayforward
3. Compatibilists and Sugar Packets: A blog and video by the Rev. Tom Berlin <http://revtomberlin.com/talking-about-lgbtq-inclusion-in-the-umc/#sthash.L25CjDOF.dpbs>
4. A summary understanding of the three plans bwcumc.org/resources/commission-on-a-way-forward/#plans

? How did the Council of Bishops receive the plans?

The Council studied, debated and requested further work on the One Church and Connectional Conference plans and advised setting the Traditional Plan aside. Later, the bishops changed their minds and included the Traditional Plan in those to be submitted to the Special Session.

? Why did the Judicial Council review the plans?

Because the Special Session is only three days, church leaders wanted to ensure that the information delegates would be voting on was not unconstitutional before the delegates gathered so that time would not be spent waiting for a declaratory decision.

Continued on next page.

? What did the Judicial Council find?

Meeting in Zurich in October, the Judicial Council, the church's "Supreme Court," chose to not rule on the Connectional Conference plan because it had too many constitutional amendments that had not yet been voted upon.

In considering the One Church Plan, the council struck three sentences that were not constitutional. They found that about one-fourth of the Traditional Plan was not in harmony with the Constitution. (See story next page.)

? When and where is the 2019 General Conference?

The Special Session of General Conference will be held Feb. 23-26, 2019, at the Dome, part of the America's Convention Complex in St. Louis, Missouri.

? How will the General Conference delegates move forward in their work at this session?

Normally there are nine to 12 legislative committees that perfect the resolutions that come before the plenary session. At the Special Session, there will be one legislative committee, focusing on this one issue. In a time of holy conferencing and parliamentary procedure, the delegates are expected to perfect the plan they wish to consider. This plan will then go to the body for debate and a vote.

? Will the delegates consider other resolutions besides the three plans?

Yes, an additional 51 petitions that have been deemed "in harmony" with the call of the Special Session have been received. The 48 petitions from the plan, along with the additional ones, can be found in the Advanced Daily Christian Advocate at www.umc.org/who-we-are/gc2019-advanced-daily-christian-advocate.

? Who will preside over the legislative session?

One of the officers who served a legislative committee in 2016. The Committee on General Conference will bring a slate of names for members to vote on.

? Who will preside over the plenary session?

Members of the Council of Bishops preside over the plenary sessions.

? What are the possible outcomes?

The delegates may choose to adopt a revised version of any of the three plans, or they might, for a variety of reasons, change nothing of substance at this session. One thing we do know, Bishop Easterling said, "the mission of the UMC will continue on

March 1. We will still be called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. God holds the future of The United Methodist Church."

? Bishop Easterling has endorsed the One Church Plan. Why does she support it?

Bishop Easterling stands with the more than 80 percent majority of the Council of Bishops who endorsed the One Church Plan. She has said it is her belief that homosexuality should not be a litmus test over who should be called United Methodist. "We can maintain our unity beyond differing understandings of God's intention for human sexuality," she said. "The One Church Plan would allow us to do just that. It does not require unanimity of belief or action, but does permit contextualization and allows persons to follow their theological convictions and conscience." A commentary with her thoughts is online at www.bwcumc.org/news-and-views/a-word-from-the-bishop-we-can-remain-together-why-i-support-the-one-church-plan/.



Bishop Easterling, left, and members of the BWC delegation pray for the church. Members include (L-R): JW Park, Joseph Daniels, Delores Martin, Ken Ow, Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, Christie Latona, and Mary Kay Totty.

? If the One Church Plan passes and a clergy person does not agree with the majority of the BWC's leadership on this issue, will this be held against them during the appointment process?

Absolutely not. Bishop Easterling has pledged, "If I ever use the appointment process as a weapon, I will need to surrender not only my assignment, but my credentials." Currently, the bishop and Cabinet take pastors' theological beliefs and other factors into consideration before making an appointment. They expect this practice to continue. "Pastors' gifts and graces would be matched with churches that have commensurate theologies."

? What happens if the pastor and the congregation do not agree on same-gender marriages?

Accommodations can be made, inviting in a guest pastor or holding the ceremony in a different location.

? Has any research been done on the number of people or churches that are expected to leave the denomination?

No. So far, talk about schism and people leaving is only conjecture. However, some members of the Wesleyan Covenant Association have expressed their intention to leave.

? Can churches take their buildings with them if they decide to leave the denomination?

No. First, it is important to note that a church is much more than a building. If people decide to no longer be members of their United Methodist church, they can leave. Second, the trust clause, which holds all property in trust for the annual conference, assures that

people will not take their buildings if they choose to leave the denomination. In the recent past, some United Methodist churches have bought their buildings from annual conferences at fair market value when they left the denomination.

? How can I express my opinion on this issue?

The BWC delegates have expressed a willingness to receive information and thoughts from everyone. A listing of the delegates and their e-mails is online at www.bwcumc.org/awayforward. The chairs of the delegation are Delores Martin and the Rev. T.R. Chattin.

? What can I or my church do before the Special Session?

All congregations are asked to have conversations about the Commission on a Way Forward's work and our UMC process so that people in the pews understand our current position. A Prayer initiative also calls on United Methodists to pray for the church each day from 2:23 to 2:26 p.m.

? Which delegate is my church's delegate? Do delegates seek to represent local church's wishes with their vote?

In effect, all of the delegates are yours. Each church sends their pastor(s) and lay member(s) to an Annual Conference Session. At those sessions, delegates for the entire Annual Conference are elected. The first six laity and six clergy are General Conference delegates; the next six laity and clergy are Jurisdictional delegates; and the next four laity and four clergy serve as reserves. The delegation meets as a whole but only the first seven (six plus one reserve) clergy and laity are sent to General Conference on our behalf. The majority of delegates on the BWC delegation understand that they were elected because people in the Annual Conference believed in them. They are open to receiving input from others as part of their discernment process, and vote from a place of discernment, which includes their conscience.

? What does the Bible say about homosexuality that should inform a Way Forward?

People who hold a high value of Scripture with a deep love of God and a deep love of the Word of God, come down on differing sides of this issue and others. Part of being United Methodist includes the value of loving alike without thinking alike, informed by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Learn more about the Wesleyan quadrilateral at www.umc.org/what-we-believe/wesleyan-quadrilateral.

? How will the potential changes affect clergy and other pensions?

What has been paid into the pension plan cannot be taken away. Everyone will still have the money they contributed. However, this is a complex issue. Depending upon the outcome, it might take 20 years to fully resolve itself. Wespath has done some analysis, which is available at www.wespath.org/wayforwardwespathfaq.

One Church Plan

- The One Church Plan attempts to provide as much space as possible for people who do not share the same views on homosexuality.
- The language that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” will be removed from the Discipline and replaced with “We agree that we are not of one mind regarding human sexuality.” It removes language stating that marriage is just between a man and a woman.
- It does not force or penalize pastors to perform a same sex wedding nor does it force or penalize churches to hold same sex wedding ceremonies on their property.
- Each Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry would determine whether to ask questions about whether a person affirms that he/she is LGBTQ.
- Bishops would not be forced to ordain or not ordain LGBTQ people if they cannot in good conscience do so.

Connectional Conference Plan

- This plan would replace the current five jurisdictional conferences (geographic regions in the United States; outside the United States, they are called Central Conferences) with five Connectional Conferences: Progressive, Traditional, and Unity.
- This plan calls for numerous Constitutional Amendments.
- All three would use a general Book of Discipline with the ability to adapt other portions to their context for ministry.
- Local churches would choose which Connectional Conference they would join; laity may find themselves in a church which votes to join a CC with which they don't agree.
- Clergy would choose which Connectional Conference they would join.
- Jurisdictional Conferences would vote to join a Connectional Conference; annual conferences who want to join a different Connectional Conference may do so by vote.

Traditional Plan

- The Traditional Plan provides for stronger accountability to the Book of Discipline.
- There are specific accountability processes for Boards of Ordained Ministry, clergy, bishops and annual conferences who violate the Discipline.
- Marriage is seen as between one man and one woman.
- No clergy may perform same sex weddings.
- No ordination of LGBTQ people.
- Automatic penalty for pastors who perform same sex weddings.
- Laity would participate in a local church conference vote on whether to exit from the UMC; laity may find themselves in a church which with which they don't agree.

** Judicial Council ruled 3 parts of the One Church Plan, and 9 parts of the Traditional Plan, unconstitutional. They did not rule on the Connectional Conference Plan. See story below.*

For more information, visit
www.bwcumc.org/awayforward

Starnes offers insights on Judicial Council rulings

BY MELISSA LAUBER
UMConnection Staff

AS UNITED METHODISTS move forward in determining the church's stance on human sexuality issues, the Judicial Council met in late October to examine the three plans being brought to the Special Session of General Conference.

Tom Starnes, the chancellor of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, was in Switzerland for the Judicial Council hearing.

Starnes, a partner at Drinker, Biddle and Reath LLP in Washington, D.C., did not speak in his official role. Rather, as a son of the church and someone whose faith intersects with his passion for the law, Starnes had filed an amicus brief on behalf of a group of 24 conference chancellors who believe strongly that the unity of The United Methodist Church should be preserved notwithstanding that its members have differing perspectives on issues regarding human sexuality.

During the oral hearing in Zurich on Oct. 23, Starnes presented arguments that both defended the constitutionality of the One Church Plan and challenged the constitutionality of the Traditional Plan. On Oct. 29, the Judicial Council handed down a 58-page opinion that deemed parts of both of those plans to be unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the Council deferred ruling on the Connectional Conference plan, reasoning that it lacks jurisdiction to assess the constitutionality of proposed legislation that itself includes proposed changes to the constitution.

Starnes was

invited to attend a Nov. 10 meeting of the delegation of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, who will be voting on which plan to adopt at the upcoming Special Session in St. Louis, in an effort to help the delegation digest the Judicial Council's lengthy opinion and rulings.

The denomination's current Book of Discipline calls homosexuality “incompatible with Christian teaching.” It bans the ordination and appointment of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals,” and it prohibits same-sex marriages from being performed by United Methodist clergy or in United Methodist churches.

The core changes proposed in the One Church Plan are to strike the “incompatible” language, along with the corresponding ordination and marriage bans, and allow each annual conference's Board of Ordained Ministry and clergy session to determine standards for ordination, including standards related to human sexuality.

Similarly, the One Church plan proposes to let each pastor decide whether or not they will perform same-sex marriages, and to let each congregation vote on whether same-sex marriages may be celebrated in their buildings.

The Judicial Council upheld the constitutionality of those core aspects of the One Church Plan, Starnes said, reasoning that “connectionalism does not require uniformity,” but “allows for contextualization.”

At the same time, the Judicial Council ruled that parts of three of the One Church plan's 17 proposed petitions violated “separation of powers” principles included in the denomination's constitution:

1. A proposal authorizing bishops to seek the non-binding advice of the annual conference session on ordination standards, in order to “inform the Board of Ordained Ministry in its work,” was held to risk “crossing the line between episcopal and administrative functions.”
2. A provision requiring reassignment of a pastor in case of “unresolved disagreement” with a congregation concerning same-sex marriage was held to violate the bishop's constitutional prerogative to appoint pastors to their charges.
3. A provision that allows bishops to limit the frequency of clergy session votes on ordination standards infringes on the clergy session's constitutional authority to vote on all matters relating to the character, conference relations, and ordination of clergy.

The Traditional Plan, the United Methodist News Service reported, seeks to enhance enforcement of current bans related to homosexuality, including imposing mandatory penalties on violations.

Starnes had reservations about whether the Traditional Plan should even come before

General Conference. He argued that the Traditional Plan is not “in harmony” with the purpose of the called Special Session, as required by Discipline ¶14, because the Traditional Plan rejects the idea of “preserving unity amid diverse perspectives on human sexuality,” and is instead based on “the presupposition that The United Methodist Church ought to have one unified moral stance on the issues of marriage and sexuality.”

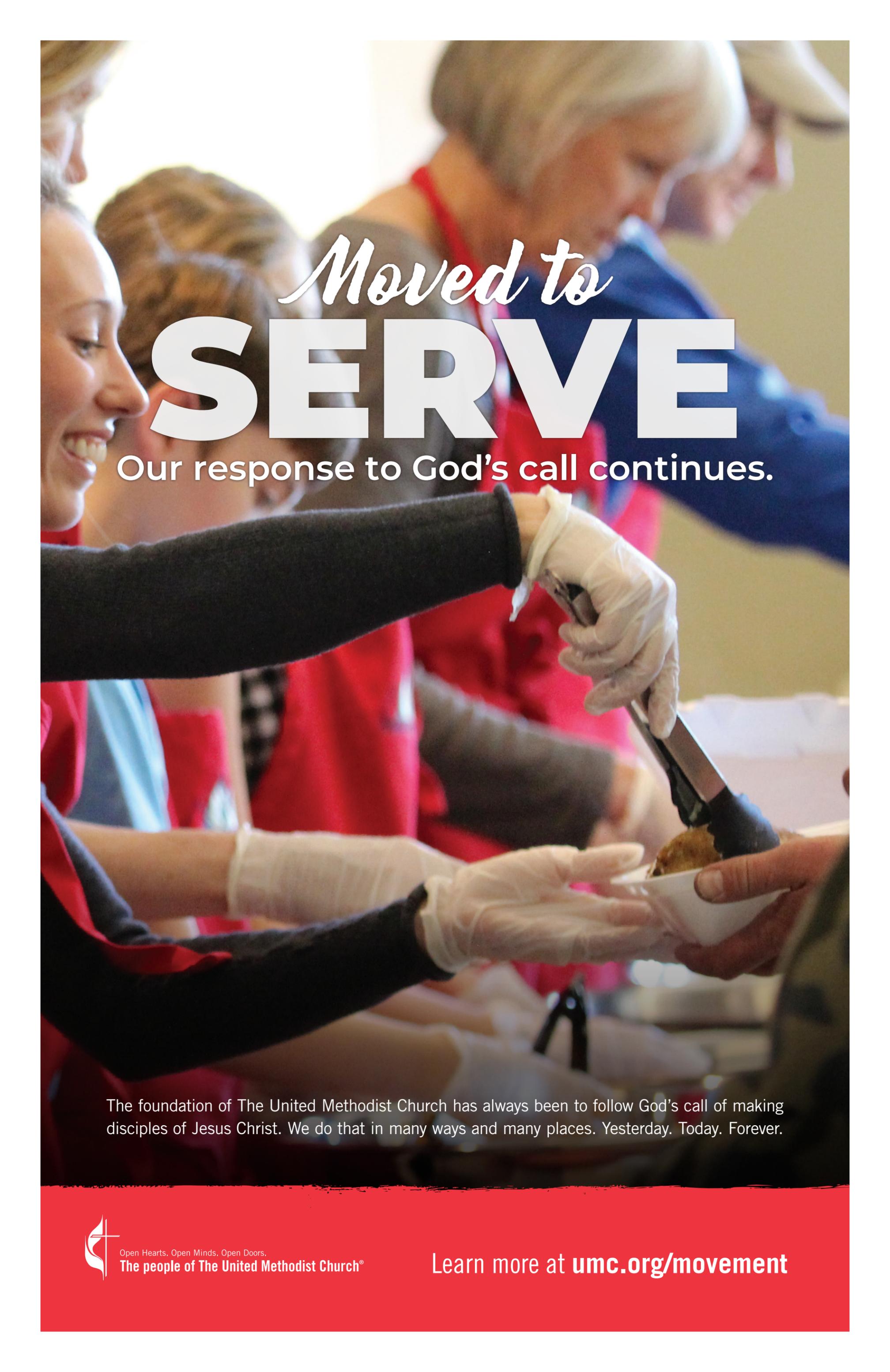
The Judicial Council did not agree with Starnes on that issue, but it ruled that certain portions of the plan strayed from the constitution on matters of due process and by elevating adherence to requirements related to homosexuality above all other requirements.

Of the Traditional Plan's 17 distinct petitions, the Judicial Council held that seven were unconstitutional in their entirety, and it identified unconstitutional portions in two others. The constitutionally defective provisions included those seeking to allow congregations to withdraw, in what has been called a “gracious exit,” from the denomination.

The third plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, would reorganize the church in the U.S., with conferences aligning based on theology or perspective on LGBTQ ministry. This plan calls for multiple constitutional amendments and because of this, was not addressed by the Judicial Council, Starnes said.

Starnes hesitates to predict what might happen when the General Conference meets Feb. 23-26 in St. Louis.

However, his love for the church and his understanding of Methodist polity have convinced him, as he said in his brief, that “schism need not be the inevitable result of our connection's seemingly interminable controversy over human sexuality issues.”



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