



Feature

General Conference 2019

by Alex Joyner

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church ended on February 26 with the passage of the Traditional Plan, one of several plans presented to the denomination as a way forward on the issue of human sexuality. What does the passage of this plan mean? What happened in St. Louis and what happens next?

What Just Happened in St. Louis?

It was a chaotic scene as delegates left The Dome at America's Center in St. Louis on the evening of Tuesday, February 26. Security personnel had to assist in the exit as singing protestors supporting full inclusion of LGBTQ persons filled the foyer. Meanwhile crews were set to bring in dirt to prepare the former football arena for a monster truck rally. As General Conference 2019 came to a close, many people who had followed it from afar, via livestream, in news reports, and from on the ground in St. Louis were left wondering, *What just happened here?*

This global gathering of United Methodists usually takes place once every four years, but the Council of Bishops convened a special four-day session of the General Conference, the legislative body of The United Methodist Church, to act on plans presented by the 32-member Commission on a Way Forward. The commission was formed after action by the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon. Delegates there had reached an impasse over issues of human sexuality, particularly regarding questions about the definition of marriage, the qualifications for ordination, and whether the Church's teachings and practices should be uniform or adaptable based on cultural context and local decision-making.

The Commission, composed of lay and clergy members who represented a broad swath of the United Methodist connection, both in terms of theological and geographic diversity, worked for many months and presented a report that outlined three possible paths for maintaining unity. One of these paths—the One Church Plan—was endorsed by the majority of the Commission and the Council of Bishops and would have allowed space for local churches and clergy to conduct same-gender weddings and for annual conferences to ordain gay clergy without mandating that they do so.

REFLECT:

- What headlines did you see related to the General Conference?
- What other options might you imagine for how a global church body can discern a way forward on hard questions?

The Traditional Plan

As the General Conference delegates set priorities for their work on Sunday, they resolved to begin their work with the Traditional Plan, which was also included in the Commission's report. This plan retains the current prohibitive language in the *Book of Discipline* and increases enforcement mechanisms for clergy, bishops, and annual conferences that do not comply.

Supporters of the Traditional Plan argued that the language sets appropriate, biblical boundaries that do not prohibit LGBTQ persons from being welcomed in United Methodist churches. Bishop Scott Jones, who serves the Texas Conference, told United Methodist News Service, "This decision is consistent with our denomination's historic stance on human sexuality, outlined in the *Book of Discipline* since 1972. . . . We will continue to welcome lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer persons to our churches and affirm their sacred worth."

The Rev. Jerry Kulah, from the Liberia Conference, felt that changing the denomination's stance on sexuality would be devastating for the growing African churches, Religion News Service reported. "The church in America cannot be living one way and the church in Africa living another way," he said. Delegates from outside the United States were a large and visible presence at the General Conference, making up about 41 percent of the delegates.

On the last day of the conference, Tom Berlin, pastor of Floris UMC in Herndon, Virginia, presented the One Church Plan with an impassioned speech that reminded the delegates of the challenges the denomination would face, particularly in reaching younger generations, if the Traditional Plan passed. "It will be a virus that will make the American church very sick. . . . Many pastors are going to leave, many annual conferences will leave. . . . There will be trials, and they will be on the news. The only news about the church will be about people we don't serve."

In the end, the One Church Plan was rejected by a vote of 449 against and 374 in favor. After rancorous debate that left many delegates on all sides feeling wounded, the Traditional Plan was finally passed by a vote of 438 in favor and 384 against. During a break taken after the vote, supporters of greater inclusion of LGBTQ persons filled the center of the assembly area and expressed their disappointment by singing the chorus of "Blessed Assurance," while Traditional Plan proponents could be seen dancing in celebration nearby.

While the plans from the Commission on a Way Forward received most of the attention, the General Conference took two other notable actions. Proposals by the denomination's pension agency, Wespath Benefits and Investments, were adopted, which put the pension plan on stronger financial footing. The Conference also approved a disaffiliation petition that would allow churches to leave the denomination with their property, with some significant limitations.

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REFLECT:

- How do you imagine people in your church and community will react to the General Conference actions?
- How do you think young people will react to the decision?

What Happens Next?

Despite the passage of the Traditional Plan by the General Conference, the questions of what happens next and whether the denomination has found a way forward are still uncertain. The first big hurdle for the new legislation is a declaratory decision by the Judicial Council, the denomination's highest court, on whether or not it is constitutional. As the General Conference began its work on February 26, it received word from the Council that there were constitutional issues with eight of the petitions that make up the Traditional Plan. In addition, the disaffiliation petitions the General Conference were working with at the time were also ruled unconstitutional.

Since amendments that passed during the last day of the conference didn't address all of the constitutional issues raised, it is likely that major parts of the Traditional Plan will still be ruled out of order when the Judicial Council meets in late April. After the conference ended, the Council of Bishops also referred the disaffiliation plan that was passed to the Judicial Council.

Any petitions that are ruled out of order would not be included in the *Book of Discipline*. Petitions that survive would go into effect in the United States on January 1, 2020, and later in Central Conferences outside the U.S. All of this could also be revisited when the next regular General Conference meets May 5–15, 2020.

REFLECT:

- What questions or concerns do you have about what happened at General Conference and what happens next?
- As a group, share your hopes for the future of The United Methodist Church, and pray together for that future.

Reactions

In the meantime, some United Methodist groups are assessing other actions that they might take. Both proponents and opponents of the Traditional Plan left with bruises from the debate and the outcome. Supporters of that plan were discouraged about delaying tactics from opponents such as the Rev. Mark Holland, a delegate from the Great Plains Conference, who held aloft a stack of amendments and said, "We're gonna amend until the monster trucks roll in!" In effect, Holland

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was threatening to run out the clock on the last session, which had a hard deadline of 6:30 p.m. The delays prevented other amendments that might have addressed the constitutional issues.

Supporters also complained about allegations from some speakers that they were spreading hate by holding to a position that has been church policy since 1972. UMNS said that Rio Texas Conference delegate Aislinn Deviney, describing herself as a young evangelical delegate, told the conference, “We all have family and friends who are LGBTQ that we love and value.” Nevertheless, she said, many young people “fiercely believe marriage is between one man and one woman.”

The Wesleyan Covenant Association, a traditionalist network with many United Methodist members, had talked about facilitating a break with the denomination if the Traditional Plan was not passed. In a statement released on February 28, the WCA said, “We are committed to working with other United Methodists to achieve” full passage of a traditionalist plan “at the next General Conference in 2020, including a gracious exit provision. And should circumstances warrant, we remain prepared to launch a new Methodist movement.”

Meanwhile, centrist and progressive United Methodists were contemplating their options as well. Progressives who had hoped for at least some liberalizing of language that would allow for regions of the church to affirm same-sex marriage and ordination of LGBTQ clergy were bitterly disappointed by the conference’s actions. Jen Ihlo, of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, told RNS, “I was baptized and confirmed in the United Methodist Church, but that church doesn’t seem to exist anymore. It’s judgmental. It’s divisive, it’s harmful. And that’s not what Jesus preached.”

As the conference closed, the Rev. Donna Pritchard, of the Oregon-Idaho Conference, read a statement on behalf of the Western Jurisdiction, the region of the denomination that elected Karen Oliveto, an openly gay clergywoman, as bishop in 2016. The statement read, in part, that “the Western Jurisdiction intends to continue to be one church, fully inclusive and open to all God’s children across the theological and social spectrum.”

REFLECT:

- Divide into three groups and assign each one of the three positions (traditional, centrist, progressive) described here. Why might you feel disappointed with the results?
- How have you responded to the decisions made at General Conference? What questions has it raised for you? What responses have you seen expressed by others?

Where Do We Go From Here?

The spectacle of the General Conference’s final day invites comparisons to the political environment of the United States with its divisive debates and gridlocked institutions, but there were other moments during the conference that hinted at alternative possibilities. The participants involved in the Commission on a Way Forward did their best to model a form of genuine Christian conferencing that was carried out with integrity, prayerfulness, and an earnest desire to preserve the unity of the Church. This was clear from the testimony given by members of the Commission as they presented to the conference. Also, an excellent group of musicians was present for all the proceedings, providing moments of grace and even joy amidst the tensions.

The New Testament letter of James offers some counsel on what Christian interactions should look like. Wisdom, James says, “is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts” (James 3:17-18).

It is difficult, when we feel that principles of justice or accountability are at stake, to reconcile these with the peaceful and wise behavior that James describes. One Virginia Conference pastor, Jonathan Page, who observed the conference, offers a simple path for us as we move forward. In a Facebook post, Page noted that while General Conference can make decisions on behalf of the church, it does not replace the witness of the church on the ground. Page continues, “That’s our job. . . . Let’s just go love people like Jesus would. Today. And tomorrow. And every day into everlasting.”

REFLECT:

- Why do local churches look different from General Conference?
- How can we “go love people like Jesus would”?

Helpful Links

- A number of articles that provide more detail on the proceedings and outcomes of the 2019 General Conference can be found at the UM news website: <https://www.umnews.org>
- The report of the Commission on a Way Forward can be found in the Advance Edition of the *Daily Christian Advocate* beginning on page 123:
http://cdnfiles.umc.org/Website_Properties/general-conference/2019/documents/general-conference-2019-adca-english.pdf

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Leader Helps

Opening Prayer: In this season of discernment, help us, as your Church, to meet across the divides. Pour out your Spirit on us gathered here. By your Spirit, we ask you to make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. We ask that you support us in this work until, in your Spirit, the blurred and blinding chaos of this broken world and Church resolves into a feast where you are both host and Lord. Amen.

- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- If you have time for further Bible reflection, ask participants to read through James 2–3 and discuss how James’s advice to the church then can speak to us today.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Closing prayer: For a fire we have had sparked within, but which only now flickers, For a blaze that warms and does not lay waste, For the hearth we would gather around and admire, For the way a fine light dances in each other’s eyes, For a way forward on a Word-lit path, For a fire in the winter, Lord, we pray. Amen.

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