

FAQ – Following the Special Session of the General Conference

Note: If you have any more questions, email Alex Shanks, Assistant to the Bishop, at ashanks@flumc.org

What is General Conference?

864 delegates (half lay; half clergy) met February 23-26 in St. Louis, MO, to discuss the report of the Commission on a Way Forward at a Special Session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. The General Conference is the highest legislative body in the church and the only group who can decide church law and speak officially for the church.

What did the General Conference decide?

The decision of the General Conference was to offer a majority support for the Traditional Plan. The vote was 53% for and 47% against. It needed a simple majority to pass. They also passed legislation related to protecting our pension plans and working with churches who may want to disaffiliate from the denomination.

What is the Traditional Plan?

The Traditional Plan keeps the current language around homosexuality and increases accountability by streamlining the processes to enforce penalties for violations of *The Book of Discipline* related to marriage and ordination of homosexual persons.

What does this mean for same-sex marriage and ordination of LGBTQ persons?

The current language of the *Discipline* remains the same. Churches are not permitted to host same-sex weddings, pastors are not permitted to perform same-sex weddings and self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not permitted to be clergy.

What do we believe about the LGBTQ community?

The LGBTQ community and their allies are in all our churches and in our cities. We continue to teach and believe that all persons are welcomed in the church. Our *Discipline* mandates that “all persons are individuals of sacred worth” and “all persons need the ministry of Jesus.” We will continue to share God’s love with all people. LGBTQ persons are welcome in our churches and we are blessed by their faith and gifts. There are no restrictions in the *Discipline* around the baptism, membership, and servant leadership of LGBTQ persons.

What does this mean for our United Methodist Church?

Nothing changes in our missional practices. Churches will continue to welcome all people because as our *Discipline* mandates “all persons are individuals of sacred worth.” We remain an open table that welcomes all. Churches are open to people of all nations, ethnic groups, ages and sexual orientations. We hope to find better ways to embrace our diversity and put divisiveness behind us so that we may focus our energies toward ministry. We should remember that loving family members can disagree, even on important issues like these. We are a diverse and global church, and, because of that, we have cultural, generational and geographical differences. We seek to honor God and offer abundant grace to all.

What can traditionalists who agree with the results of General Conference do?

The faith of our traditionalists is a gift to God and to our churches. Too often, their stances have been misunderstood as driven by hatred, as opposed to being of deeply held faith. Our conference includes at every level of leadership evangelicals who are of the utmost integrity. Delegates for General Conference 2020 will be elected in June at annual conference. You can ask your annual conference clergy and lay delegates to support delegate candidates who will work to maintain the action of the 2019 General Conference.

What can we do if we disagree with the results of General Conference?

You can be creative and intentional in how you reach out to the LGBTQ community who are hurting and wondering if there is a place for them in our churches. There are many ways to welcome our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and still live within the *Discipline*. Delegates for General Conference 2020 will be elected in June at annual conference. You can ask your clergy and lay delegates to annual conference to support delegate candidates who will work to make changes to our *Book of Discipline*.

Can you give more detail about what passed at General Conference?

- 1) Wespeth petitions passed. Exiting churches must pay their fair share of pension liability. Exiting clergy retain their pension, but it is converted to limit further liability to the conference.
- 2) Current language around sexuality and restrictions on same-sex weddings and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals is retained.
- 3) The Traditional Plan passed except for the main petition. This means there will be no required certification by annual conferences and bishops that they will follow the *Discipline* and no method for annual conferences to leave the denomination.
- 4) Eight parts of the Traditional Plan passed and have previously been ruled constitutional by the Judicial Council. The Judicial Council will consider their constitutionality again in April but are not likely to reverse their decision. This means that the definition of self-avowed practicing homosexual now includes those who are in a same-sex marriage. Bishops cannot commission or ordain lesbian or gay pastors or consecrate them as bishops. Boards of ordained ministry must do a full examination of clergy candidates including whether they are a self-avowed practicing homosexual. Pastors who perform weddings and are convicted by trial will have minimum penalties of suspension (first offense) and surrender of credentials (second offense). Bishops can only dismiss complaints for reasons of law or fact. Just Resolutions must acknowledge all harm done and be agreed to by the person bringing the complaint. The church can appeal a decision for egregious errors of law.
- 5) One part of the Traditional Plan passed, but it may or may not be constitutional and awaits the decision of the Judicial Council. It would require all members of the board of ordained ministry to certify they will follow the *Discipline*.
- 6) An amended exit plan for churches passed, but it may or may not be constitutional. It would allow for local churches to exit with their property and assets if 2/3 of the members vote to do so, and they care for pension liabilities and one year of apportionments.

What impact did delegates from outside the U.S. have on this decision?

Every delegate votes their own conscience and undoubtedly delegates from inside and outside the U.S. voted to support or not support all the plans. Votes are not public. Forty percent of the delegates are from outside the U.S., and many of them are from places that hold a traditional view of marriage.

Can General Conference 2020 change all of this?

The decisions of one General Conference cannot bind the decisions of another General Conference.

What will we do if clergy or churches do not follow the *Discipline* and choose to perform or host same-sex weddings?

There are processes in the *Discipline* for this. It begins with someone bringing a complaint against someone else. It includes fair process, a pastoral response, the potential of a Just Resolution and, if needed, a trial with a jury of clergy peers. We are committed to following the *Book of Discipline* as a resource for oversight and supervision in support of the church's mission.

Please join us in prayer for our church, especially for those who are disappointed by this outcome.