

Finding a Way Forward: The UMC Wrestles with Human Sexuality

Governing policies of the UMC are determined by General Conference, a global conference of UM leaders, elected by annual conferences, held every four years. Clergy and laity are equally represented; bishops have voice but not a vote. For years, there has been tension and disagreement on the issue of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons among United Methodists across the theological spectrum and talk of a potential church split over the issue of homosexuality. To help us break this stalemate, by a vote of 428-405, the 2016 General Conference authorized the Council of Bishops to form a commission to discern a path forward regarding same-gender weddings and full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in ministry; to respect diverse theological and Scriptural understandings; and to foster and preserve unity.

The Commission on a Way Forward was created as a representative body (32 people, 9 nations, all jurisdictions, 15 states, men and women, straight and gay, laity, elders, deacons, bishops, multigenerational) for this purpose. Over the course of the last 18 months, they developed and discussed three possible plans: the **Traditionalist Plan**, the **One Church Plan**, and the **Connectional Conference Plan**. In May of 2018, the Commission presented its report to the Council on Bishops, who in turn voted overwhelmingly to present their recommendation of the **One Church Plan** to a special gathering of the General Conference in February 2019 in St. Louis (*the other two plans will be included in their report for informational purposes*).

Current Position of the UMC on LGBTQ Inclusion

From the Social Principles

“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 reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. 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.” (The Book of Discipline, 161.G)

From the Book of Discipline: Ministry of the Ordained

“While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” (304.3)

“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.” (341.6)

The One Church Plan

- Removes the restrictive language from the Book of Discipline
- Does not require any annual conference, bishop, congregation, or pastor to act contrary to their convictions or conscience
- Maintains the current leadership structure of the denomination as one body
- Provides conferences, churches, and pastors flexibility while retaining the connectional nature of the UMC
- Permits central conferences (Africa) to retain disciplinary authority to adapt the Book of Discipline and continue to include traditional language and values

The Traditional Plan

- Strengthens the current language of the Book of Discipline
- Streamlines the process for violations of the Book of Discipline
- Maintains the structure of the UMC as it currently exists
- Continues the relationships between the church and all general agencies and commissions

The Connectional Conference Plan

- Allows conferences to choose between three Connectional Conferences (Traditionalist, Progressive, or Variety of Approaches)
- Each Connectional Conference would have its own Book of Discipline
- Each Connectional Conference would have its own College of Bishops
- Central Conferences may become their own Connectional Conference
- Redefined Council of Bishops focused on ecumenical relationships and shared learning
- Would require significant amendments to the Constitution (requires 2/3 majority of General Conference plus 2/3 affirmative vote of aggregate members of annual conferences)

Full details of the plans and accompanying legislative proposals will be released as soon as final editing of the entire report is completed and translated into the four official languages of the General Conference delegates (estimated to be no later than July 8). The Special General Conference next February will only discuss and act upon the issue of human sexuality. Petitions other than the report of the Council of Bishops may be submitted by conferences, local churches, clergy, and laity.

For more information:

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