

Theological and Biblical Basis for the Three Plans

The following items were noted in the Commission on a Way Forward's report to the Council of Bishops in sections titled "Theological and Biblical foundations" corresponding to each of the three plans known to be considered during the special session of General Conference in February 2019.

One Church Plan

From Pages 12-15

The work of the Commission on a Way Forward is missional in nature. It is done with a desire to see the church make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The church fulfills its mission not at the center of its institutional life, but at the edge, the margins where it engages the world in a variety of contexts. The role of leadership in the church is to draw the attention of the church toward the margins. It's at that margin that people who belong to the church engage other people beyond the church with the evangelistic mission of the church, inviting them to the spiritual life. It's at the margin that we offer our ministries of mercy, service, and justice to relieve suffering, seek peace, and reconcile people. The role of leadership in the church is to direct the attention of the church toward those contexts, and therefore toward the mission.

The apostle Paul speaks to the complexity of this task when he writes, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:20-23 NRSV)

The One Church Plan acknowledges that practices among vital churches need room to thrive depending on their mission field, and the necessary incarnational identification with those we seek to serve. The variety of answers to the question "Who is my neighbor?" determines how practices in one context will be different from another.

The Commission hears a yearning from both traditionalists and progressives for more space. More space means more structural distance from people who practice ministry differently or more autonomy to adapt practices to the context that may not be requested elsewhere. Traditionalists do not want to be required to participate in same-sex weddings, the ordination of gay persons, or the financial support of a bishop in a same-sex marriage. Progressives want space to freely exercise ministries that include same-sex weddings, the ordination of gay persons, and the same-sex marriage of clergy. United Methodists in central conferences want space to shape conversations about sexuality according to their national context and without replicating whatever practices shape churches in the United States. Other United Methodists want to give space as generously as possible without compromising core identity and mission.

This desire for space is both a yearning for the necessary contextualization for missional vitality and a challenge to the unity of the church. Too much space challenges the unity of the church by risking

further separation of our connection. Little or no space will lead us to enforce uniformity in ways that could continue our impasse. The One Church Plan is built on the belief that it is possible to live with more space while we focus on our common mission. The One Church Plan has no impact on conferences outside the U.S. that are located in countries where same-sex marriage is illegal or whose members desire for the current language of *The Book of Discipline* to remain applicable in their context.

The One Church Plan honors the perspective of United Methodists who believe that our current impasse over marriage and ordination of homosexual persons does not rise to the level of a church dividing issue. Such persons are deeply convicted by and committed to the words of Jesus prayer for unity in John 17:20-26. Here Jesus prays, “that all of them may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (NRSV)

While some may see dividing the United Methodist church as a function of greater holiness or righteousness, others see it as a sign of the brokenness of the body of Christ. This division, some may argue, is not in keeping with the will of God for a community of believers who share a common heritage, doctrine, beliefs, and ministry.

Division also comes at a great expense. Historically, the common desire to alleviate suffering and address injustice in the world has been a focus of unity for our diverse denomination. Because of unity, United Methodists across the globe work together to offer Christ to their neighbors, build schools so that children are educated, operate hospitals and clinics that heal the sick, offer food and relief to the poor and victims of natural disasters, along with other efforts beyond measure. We understand that suffering is part of the human condition. We also recognize that there are forms of suffering in the world that are contrary to the will of God. We believe that suffering causes harm and that the alleviation of suffering to be part of the common mission of the United Methodist Church, where we believe that, “if one member [of Christ’s body] suffers, all suffer together with it...” (1 Corinthians 12:26 NRSV)

We are aware that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) persons exist in every nation and every culture in the world, with varying degrees of openness, acceptance, and freedom. LGBTQ persons are our brothers and sisters; they are parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and friends. There are, and have been, LGBTQ persons serving at all levels of leadership in the UMC, as laity and clergy. Currently they suffer as they are unable to live into God’s calling on their lives to ordination or to lay leadership.

The UMC Social Principles state that all people are persons of sacred worth. This calls us to honor the human dignity of all persons and we believe that it is the calling of the church to be about the eradication of all forms of suffering. It is our sacred obligation to work to end suffering everywhere, that all might be free. We do this in order to live into our calling to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

The common desire to both minister to those who suffer and eliminate injustice is a meeting point of community for the United Methodist Church. As we resolve these issues, our witness can be magnified in places of ministry where we experience shared determination to end suffering, which is informed and enriched through the viewpoints and knowledge of our various cultures.

The authors of “Wonder, Love and Praise” write about the unexpected ways God creates community that are essential to the United Methodist Church. *The church comes into being because the Spirit of God leads us into community—perhaps with persons with whom we would least expect to associate—as*

the very matrix of our salvation. That Spirit-formed community becomes the context within which we enter into the new life God offers us, and it is a community whose reach is constantly being extended as its members, in the power of the Spirit, offer the gift of community to others, and likewise receive it from them. In that very Spirit, Wesley and those in connection with him found themselves moving beyond the established norms of churchly behavior, and challenging the church, by their own example, to enact more fully God's gift of community. Thus the term "connection" took on new resonances of meaning, as what Wesley called "social holiness"—the growth in love and in the other fruits of the Spirit that is possible only in community—was realized in new situations and settings. This willingness to transgress boundaries of convention, class, and culture in pursuit of God's gift of community, notes United Methodist historian Russell Richey, illumines connectionalism's essentially missional character. From the beginning, connectionalism stood in service of mission, tuning every aspect of Methodist communal life—from structure to polity to discipline—to an "evangelizing and reforming" purpose. . . . [It is United Methodism's] means of discovering mission and supporting mission; in this bonding we seek to understand and enact our life of service.'⁸ Together, these convictions shape our United Methodist understanding of what it is to be the church. The ways they have come to expression in our history account in part for our particular ways of being the church, within the larger body of Christ. (Wonder, Love and Praise, lines 185-206)

The One Church plan acknowledges the consciences of many by giving options to pastors who desire to perform marriages and conferences who wish to ordain gay persons. It offers assurances to pastors and conferences who do not wish to do so. The One Church Plan reminds the church that the question before us is how we will include homosexual persons that are among us now as well as those who will be part of The United Methodist Church in the future. It affirms clear teaching of the bible that promiscuity, whether among persons who are straight or gay, is neither a healthy nor a holy lifestyle. It also honors the missiology of The United Methodist Church and enables central conferences to be self-determined in matters of ordination and marriage.

Practices introduced in the early church also impinged the consciences of devout Christ followers in different ways. In Romans 14, Paul speaks of questions related to eating meat sacrificed to idols or which day of the week should be considered sacred. While the diversity of opinion on such issues in Paul's time may seem inconsequential today, it created deep division in the early church and was considered essential to different groups of believers. The practices of some of these groups were rooted in scripture and the tradition of God's people in Paul's time, as well as the lifestyles they left when they became followers of Christ. In such matters, Paul called those in Rome to give up judgement and contempt of each other as they worked out these differences in community. Paul writes, "*Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*" (Romans 14:19 NRSV)

Over 60 years ago United Methodists followed this admonition when its members decided to ordain women over the objection of many who did not believe scripture supported the practice and found little backing for it in the tradition of the church. At that time the church accepted a new practice that led to mutual edification and over time, resisted the impulse to judge each other in the midst of disagreement. Such changes, including those we now contemplate in the One Church Plan, are formed in the desire to be responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit and our common humility before God. These qualities are displayed by a Pharisee named Gamaliel in Acts 5 whose words protected the apostles before the Sanhedrin. When Peter and the other apostles refused to give up their preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem, the High Priest and body of elders of Israel called for their deaths. Gamaliel offered a non-reactive response that demonstrated a heart of peace. He advised his fellow council members, "*So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this*

undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5:38 NRSV)

Those who support the One Church Plan embrace this same convicted humility when they consider the matters before The United Methodist Church. They hold their convictions deeply but are open to the possibility that God is doing something new in our midst. While all may not exercise new practices allowed by this plan related to marriage or ordination, they acknowledge that they share in common a sexual ethic framed by celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. They do not wish to stand in the way of the prompting of the Holy Spirit found in so many of their brothers and sisters in Christ who will embrace these opportunities. Rather than dividing people into various camps based solely on these issues, they are willing to continue the journey together, understanding that while a purpose of human origin will fail, a purpose from God will not ultimately be hindered. It is clear that the desire of God is for The United Methodist Church to engage its mission field with renewed vitality, in order to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Connectional Conference Plan

From Pages 28-30

John Wesley confessed that God is “the great ocean of love.” (*Wesley Sermon 26*) Affirming that “Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God,” (*Wesley Sermon 36*) he proposed that Christ came: “To spread the fire of heavenly love over all the earth.” (*Wesley NT Notes – Luke 12:49*) He thus wrote that true religion “is neither more nor less than love; it is love which ‘is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.’” (*Wesley Sermon 75*) Religion is the love of God and our neighbor; that is, every man under heaven. This love ruling the whole life, animating all our tempers and passions, directing all our thoughts, words, and actions, is ‘pure religion and undefiled.’” (*Wesley Sermon 84*) It is thus not surprising that he understood that one of the tests of whether or not an institutional church was an expression of the universal church was whether it was characterized by a radical love for God and human beings. The church participates in Christ’s mission of spreading the “fire of heavenly love over the earth” through the example of its communal life, through the proclamation of God’s love revealed in the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through concrete acts of love toward others. In affirming this we need to note four Wesleyan distinctives:

- Love and holiness are two complimentary ways of describing the gracious transformation in peoples’ lives that is expressed in ultimate loyalty to God revealed in and through the scriptures and a self-sacrificial commitment to the spiritual and bodily well-being of others.
- Love and law are inseparably interrelated and cannot be played off against each other. The law is the expression of what radical love for God and others requires in particular contexts and relationships. To love God is to obey God’s commandments.
- The purpose of God’s grace is to transform our lives so that pervasive love defeats and drives out sin. However, this occurs as we respond to the work of the Spirit of God.
- The structures and polity of an institutional church are a mixture of divine institution and human wisdom directed towards the mission of the church to embody and spread “heavenly love.” Ideally polity is flexible, adaptive, and contextual.

Wesley wrote: “It is the nature of love to unite us together, and the greater the love, the stricter the union.” (*Sermon 75*) The visible unity of the church is thus an expression of the transforming love of

God. However, because human beings are embodied and fallen creatures, this unity is threatened by two interrelated but distinct dynamics that are themselves expressions of love.

The first is contextuality; the church is called to embody and spread divine love in diverse social, cultural, economic, political, and national contexts. The way the church structures its life and engages in its mission is shaped by its dynamic relationship with these contexts. When one institutional church is present and witnessing in diverse contexts this witness will take different shapes leading to strain on the unity of the church, particularly when one group or context dominates the decision making processes. However, contextuality is vital to our mission and identity because love can only be embodied in relation to real people in concrete contexts.

Mission in context is a key aspect of the connectional conference plan. The cry of every connection in the “connectional conference model” is the desire to share the Gospel in a way that aligns with the particular connectional conference’s biblical understandings and is relevant to the culture each connection is addressing. This plan enables each connectional conference to be a faithful ambassador of the Gospel within its own understanding of Scriptural truths and sociocultural context.

The second dynamic is freedom of conscience before God. Because we are fallen and fallible creatures our understanding of God and God’s purpose and will is always subject to mistakes and limitations. Christians sincerely seeking to love and serve God will come to different conclusions as to what God requires of them. Within a church people will have diverse and even contradictory understandings of the will of God. Our ultimate loyalty to God requires that we act in good conscience - that is, in accordance with what we are convinced is the will of God. Love for others requires that we do not coerce others to act against their consciences even when we are convinced that they are wrong.

The present conflict within the UMC over same gender marriage and ordination standards arises out of the interaction of these dynamics. Faithful Christians have come to different and contradictory understandings of God’s will in relationship to the affirmation of sexual relationships between people of the same gender. The UMC ministers in diverse socio-cultural and politico-legal contexts – these include contexts where homosexual relationships are criminal offenses punishable by death to places where same gender marriage is legal and religious or moral opposition to it is regarded as irrelevant.

The challenge before us is how to structure The United Methodist Church so that it embodies and spreads “the fire of heavenly love over all the earth” given this diversity and contradiction in conviction and context. In the Connectional Conference Plan the different connectional conferences which could reflect both differences of conviction and/or context are expressions of love in the context of diversity and contradiction, while the uniting structures embody the desire to maintain as much unity and community as possible and to share resources in fulfilling our mission. Beyond this, staying together instead of dividing embodies the common core that we share.

This plan represents a redefinition of our connection in a new way to empower disciples for greater mission and ministry.

- “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!” (II Corinthians 5:17)
- “Look! I’m doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don’t you recognize it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

New structures and relationships are needed for a new time in our Church. Keeping the old structures in place could result in a fracturing of our Church.

- “No one sews a piece of new, unshrunk cloth on old clothes because the patch tears away the cloth and makes a worse tear. No one pours new wine into old wineskins. If they did, the wineskin would burst, the wine would spill, and the wineskins would be ruined. Instead, people pour new wine into new wineskins so that both are kept safe.” (Matthew 9:16-17)

This plan emphasizes connection to Christ, while acknowledging the reality of different connectional conferences growing in different directions with different emphases and understandings. We are still connected to one another through Christ (the Vine) and our shared doctrine, heritage, mission, and shared services. Connection points include: The Apostle’s and Nicene creeds, Articles of Religion/Confession of Faith, the General Rules, Wesley hymns, John Wesley’s Standard Sermons and The Notes upon the New Testament, disciplined engagement with Scripture, works of piety, mercy and justice, sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, small group accountability and support, and a connectional way of life that includes superintendency, itineracy, and conferencing.

- “I am the vine, you are the branches.” (John 15:5 – see additionally John 15:1-17)

This plan acknowledges that we are gifted differently and creates space for those different gifts to be expressed in ways that honor conscience, while still maintaining connection to the body.

- “Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. ... You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.” (I Corinthians 12:12, 27 – see the whole chapter)

This plan provides a way to mobilize more workers for the mission and ministry of Christ through the expansion envisioned out of the multiple branches.

- “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.’” (Matthew 9:37-38)

In conclusion the Connectional Conference Plan attempts to find a way of structuring the life of The United Methodist Church so that it can embody the divine love in the midst of our diversity and disagreement. It can thus fulfill the vision that the seventy-eight year old John Wesley described as he reflected on the movement that he had founded and led.

"We all aim to spread that truly rational religion which is taught and prescribed in the Old and New Testament; namely, the love of God and neighbor, filling the heart with humility, meekness, contentedness. ... We leave every man to enjoy his own opinion, and to use his own mode of worship, desiring only that the love of God and his neighbor be the ruling principle in his heart, and show itself in his life by a uniform practice of justice, mercy, and truth. And accordingly we give the right hand of fellowship to every lover of God and man, whatever his opinion or mode of worship be; of which he is to give an account to God." (*A Short History of the People Called Methodist*).

Traditional Plan

From Appendix 3 – Page 64

The Traditional Model takes seriously the need for greater contextualization of our ministry. It provides clarity and freedom for different parts of our movement to embody our different theological emphases and values on the important questions of marriage and sexual behavior. Given that the human sexuality disagreement is one of the most significant in American culture today, it is appropriate for there to be two different Wesleyan bodies who teach differently on the question of Christian marriage between same gender persons

The unity of Christ's church has, for the last 1,000 years, taken different forms. There are different types of unity and the Wesleyan movement itself is expressed in a variety of denominations many of which overlap geographically. We should see the formation of a new Wesleyan denomination as an opportunity for a different type of unity created for the sake of mission.