

Frequently Asked Questions



From Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr:

The following questions represent some of the more prevalent inquiries to me during my 18 district town hall meetings in the Great Plains Conference. The questions are not placed in any particular order.

For information regarding who votes on the proposals, how the Commission on a Way Forward was formed and for basics about United Methodist decision-making process, please download the PowerPoint presentation at <http://gp-email.brtaapp.com/files/way+forward/town+hall+presentation+10-18.pptx> and review it in the "Notes Page" mode.

Is scripture consulted in the writings of these new plans? Is there a list of Biblical references for those who want a change?

Each plan from the Commission on a Way Forward had a section labeled "Theological and Biblical Foundation." We extracted those full portions from each plan and placed them on a single document for ease of people wanting to see that detail for themselves without reading the entire 93-page Commission on a Way Forward report. You can read those foundations at <http://gp-email.brtaapp.com/files/way+forward/theological+basis.pdf>. The Traditional Plan has no scripture mentioned in its foundation section. We're not certain why that is the case, other than, perhaps, there was an assumption made by the authors that people would know the verses associated with that plan. If you would like to read those verses yourself, we invite you to another resource, a synopsis of the book "United Methodists Divided," by a pastor in Georgia who also is a sociology professor. He provided an unbiased look at what the two sides have to say on various aspects of human sexuality. The scripture references can be found on pages 3 through 6 of the document at <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/files/way+forward/united+methodists+divided+book+summary.pdf>.

Are the bishops and the church bowing to moral pressure to admit LGBTQ persons?

This dialogue started in 1972, with the original set of Social Principles for the newly formed United Methodist Church. The church does reflect society in that the changes that happen in the secular world usually have some impact on the denomination and the local church.

While the Church considers its doctrinal affirmations a central feature of its identity and restricts official changes to a constitutional process, the Church encourages serious reflection across the conservative-to-progressive theological spectrum. As United Methodists, we are called to pay attention to the world around us. We are called to identify the needs both of individuals and of society in each generation to address those needs out of the resources of Christian faith in a way that is clear, convincing, and effective. Theology, or thought about God and our ensuing actions based on our thinking about God,

serves the Church by interpreting the world's needs and challenges to the Church and by interpreting the gospel to the world in a way that is authentic and convincing in light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge. Our theological task calls every generation to appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times. (*Book of Discipline*, UMC 2016, ¶105. Section 4 – Our Theological Task)

Are delegates voting by their personal opinion?

Each delegate to the February 2019 General Conference will vote according to what he or she discerns to be a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church's life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, delegates will reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time. John Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture (revelation necessary for our salvation), illumined by tradition (Patristics, creeds, literature of contemporary spirituality), vivified in personal experience (appropriation of God's forgiving empowering grace and liberating love), and confirmed by reason (human knowledge).

How can I share my views with the delegates?

Email the Great Plains Conference's delegates at gcdellegates@greatplainsumc.org. I have asked the delegates to read the emails so that they could experience the weight of the decision they carry as they prayerfully discern their decision, dialogue with people who agree and disagree with them, and then cast their vote. More importantly, I ask everyone to pray for the delegates each day at 2:23 p.m. the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 as a way of asking God to provide discernment, clarity and peace to the delegation.

Can the plans be changed at the special session?

The short answer is yes. One of at least six things could happen during the special session.

1. The One Church Plan could pass with some changes to satisfy concerns expressed by the Judicial Council.
2. The Connectional Conference Plan could pass in its presented form.
3. The Traditional Plan could pass with some changes to satisfy concerns expressed by the Judicial Council.
4. One of the plans could pass with as few as one or with many amendments from the floor of the special session.
5. A separate plan not considered by the Commission on a Way Forward could pass.
6. No agreement could be found, so the current Discipline remains unchanged going into the regular session of General Conference in 2020.

Who makes the decision in the local church about what type of congregation we will become?

If the One Church Plan passes, decisions about whether to allow same-sex weddings would be handled like many other decisions in the church. It may be the Board of Trustees who makes such decisions. It may be your church council or even a charge conference. It depends on the decision-making process used in your local church. For something like this, a charge conference may be the preferred method. If the Connectional Conference Plan passes, churches ultimately will have to either affirm or disavow the connectional conference – Traditional, Progressive or Unity – that their annual conference selects. Again, this may be completed in several ways, but a formal charge conference may be the best way to come to such a decision.

How would our church make our decision known to seekers?

Churches will have to put some thought and money into communicating their position to seekers. In both the One Church and Connectional Conference plans, it is conceivable that two churches in the same town – even within blocks of each other – could make different decisions regarding same-sex weddings and whether to receive an LGBTQ pastor. Churches will have to develop ways, if they choose, to identify themselves either as a traditional church or a progressive church, at least related to wedding policies.

What does “exit with grace” mean? If a church leaves the denomination, what happens to its assets? And are there written documents regarding an exit plan?

This phrase may mean different things to different people. But at its most basic level, it means crafting a procedure for professing members to withdraw their membership from The United Methodist Church and the local church. Points of consideration with regard to property include the trust clause, which means the church building actually is owned by the annual conference, and ensuring legal responsibilities are met regarding pensions for clergy, both retired and still active, who have served each particular church.

Our church seems confusing to the rest of the world. How is it one church when it seems to be two or more?

United Methodists, since the birth of the Church in 1968, has been a denomination that holds together in tension a broad theological spectrum. We have United Methodists who are staunch conservatives and others who are quite progressive. We’ve had presidential nominees in recent years who have been both Republican and Democrat. With those examples of differences, it’s easy to see why people not part of the church may see us as two or more churches. But we are united in many more things than the subjects that divide us. When disaster strikes, United Methodists are there. When the world’s people live in terror, hunger, loneliness, and degradation, United Methodists are there. While we may not be of one mind on human sexuality, United Methodists can agree that we are united in our attempts to understand the biblical message that God’s liberating love embraces the whole of creation. As a diverse people striving for consensus in understanding the gospel, we are drawn and held together as a people

in mission. We share an inheritance and a common desire to participate in the creative and redemptive activity of God in the world.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we are called to work within our diversity while exercising patience and forbearance with one another. Such patience stems neither from indifference toward truth nor from an indulgent tolerance of error but from an awareness that we know only in part and that none of us is able to search the mysteries of God except by the Spirit of God. We proceed with our theological task, trusting that the Spirit will grant us wisdom to continue our journey with the whole people of God. (*Book of Discipline*, UMC 2016, ¶105. *The Present Challenge to Theology in the Church*)

Who decides ordination – the Board of Ordained Ministry or the conference? Is it on a candidate-by-candidate basis?

The United Methodist Church has a highly developed and serious process for ordination. It starts with discernment by the individual of his or her call to set-apart ministry, then that person's local church with regard to the person's gifts and evidence of God's grace at work in and through their lives. Upon recommendation by their local church charge conference, the person is reviewed by a district committee on ministry, at which point a decision is made as to what track he or she will take to prepare for set-apart ministry. An inquiring candidate can choose to become a Certified Lay Minister, a Licensed Local Pastor, an Associate Member, an ordained Deacon, or an ordained Elder of The United Methodist Church. Associate members, Deacons, and Elders are reviewed by the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry for their calling, competency, and covenant. The final ordination steps include a vote affirming the Board of Ordained Ministry's recommendation by the clergy during our annual conference session and then, finally, ordination by the bishop. The annual conference does not vote on a person's recommendation or acceptance into the orders of clergy. That duty resides with the Board of Ordained Ministry (a mixture of clergy and lay people) as well as the clergy session at annual conference. Nor does the annual conference vote on a person's ordination. That duty resides with the presiding bishop of the annual conference.

Would laity have an influence on an LGBTQ ordination?

In the One Church Plan, the elected officers of the Board of Ordained Ministry, which includes laity, would have the chance to vote on each candidate for ministry. Lay people also would be able to help their local churches make decisions on whether they would welcome an LGBTQ person as a pastor. In the Connectional Conference Plan, recommendations of candidates for ordination rest with the Board of Ordained Ministry, but lay delegates to the Jurisdictional Conference would have a vote on which conference to join – Traditional, Progressive or Unity. Lay members to annual conference would vote to decide whether to affirm or reject the jurisdiction's choice regarding which connectional conference to join. In the Traditional Plan, LGBTQ persons would not be allowed to be ordained.

Would local churches have to make a stance on same-sex weddings and LGBTQ clergy?

If the One Church Plan passes, congregants would not have to make any decisions unless someone raises the issue of whether to amend wedding policies to allow for same-sex ceremonies. In the Connectional Conference Plan, congregants would have to decide if they agree with the choice of connectional conference with which their annual conference chose to align. If the Traditional Plan passes, only congregants that wish to exit the denomination would have to take a vote.

Can our church accept LGBTQ clergy even if the conference doesn't?

If the One Church Plan passes, and the Board of Ordained Ministry and/or the clergy session decides not to advance by recommending candidates for ordination because they do not support ordination of LGBTQ persons, then there would not be any LGBTQ clergy to be appointed to a church. If the Connectional Conference Plan passes, and if the annual conference chooses the Traditional Connectional Conference, then the church would not be sent an LGBTQ pastor unless that church chose to leave for another annual conference.

What if a couple wants to get married in a certain (i.e., childhood or special) church?

This will depend on which plan passes. If the One Church Plan passes, the couple can get married in that special church if that congregation's wedding policies allow for same-gender ceremonies. If the Connectional Conference Plan passes, it will depend on if that church is a part of the Progressive Connectional Conference, which would require all of its churches to host such ceremonies. A same-gender wedding in a Unity Connectional Conference church would depend on that church's decision on wedding policies, much like the method if the One Church Plan passes.

What if people aren't happy with the either-or situation?

Some people will not be happy with the outcome of the special session of General Conference. However, the missional question is whether we will continue to stay engaged and talking with each other to discover our emergent way forward as we walk together in our shared purposes or allow ourselves to rupture as a faith community. A co-created Way Forward for the Great Plains after the 2019 General Conference would be for us to continue stretching toward each other in love as sisters and brothers, for the sake of Christ and our greater shared missional purposes in the world, even when we have hold significantly different perspectives, affiliations, and interests.

In the Connectional Conference Plan, if each church can choose a different conference, would there be a different Book of Discipline for each church?

Yes and no. All churches would be under a general Book of Discipline that would be uniform with its Articles of Religion, General Rules and Confessions of Faith. Other parts, however, would be adaptable to contexts for ministry. For example, the Discipline for the Progressive Connectional Conference would

include language that allows for same-sex marriages and ordination of LGBTQ persons, but the Discipline for the Traditional Connectional Conference would include language prohibiting both of those practices. If the One Church Plan passes, the Articles of Religion, General Rules and Confessions of Faith would be uniform in the Discipline, but other parts would be adapted to contexts of ministry around the world.

What about multi-point charges under one pastor? Can one church go one way and another the other?

This scenario could happen in the Great Plains Conference because of our number of two- and three-point charges. If the One Church Plan or the Connectional Conferences Plan passes, the Cabinet would have to work to realign churches so that charges match affinities.

Do we have an adequate number of bishops to enforce the Traditional Plan?

If the Traditional Plan passes, several things would have to be worked out before we know the answer to that question. Two key questions – how many bishops certify they will adhere to the Discipline and what mechanisms will be put in place to hold bishops accountable – must be answered. The Judicial Council’s decision in late October ruled the original mechanism for holding bishops accountable to be unconstitutional, so a revision will need to be made prior to or during the special session of General Conference in February.

If we go away from the Traditional Plan, will pastors who have been de-credentialed and withdrawn from annual conference clergy membership be able to return?

Though not automatic, if the One Church Plan or the Connectional Conference Plan – or some other legislation that allows for ordination of LGBTQ pastors – passes, it is conceivable that people who have been disciplined could apply for reinstatement.

What resources will be available for churches to make decisions at the local level?

Just as it has leading up to the special session of General Conference, the annual conference staff will work diligently to develop resources to help the local church based on the decision made at the special session of General Conference. Until that decision is reached, however, it is difficult to determine what resources are needed, though an attempt to address some concerns will be made prior to the special session. Please keep checking our resources pages at www.greatplainsumc.org/cowf for updates.