

Common Questions and Answers from District Conversations

Who makes decisions on behalf of The United Methodist Church concerning issues related to human sexuality?

Since the beginning of the Methodist Church over 200 years ago, the General Conference has been the only body that has the authority to speak officially on behalf of the entire United Methodist Church, including issues related to human sexuality. The General Conference is a legislative body comprised of delegates on a proportional basis from all the annual conferences that make up the global United Methodist Church. Over 40% of the delegates come from outside the United States. There are 864 delegates to General Conference, half laity and half clergy. There are eight clergy and eight laity from Indiana who are voting members.

Why will there be a Special-Called General Conference in 2019 instead of waiting until the regularly scheduled session in 2020?

The 2016 General Conference requested help from the Council of Bishops to find a Way Forward. After prayer and discernment, the Council of Bishops, which has been given the authority to make such decisions by The Book of Discipline, believed it would be helpful to have a Special Session of the General Conference in 2019 that could focus solely on matters related to human sexuality rather than trying to squeeze it into the regular quadrennial General Conference in 2020 that also considers many other items. In addition, The Council of Bishops discerned the need to appoint a Commission on A Way Forward with individuals from across the denomination, representing all voices, to work on a plan to bring to the Special Session. The Special Session will be held February 23-26 in St. Louis, Missouri. The Commission on A Way Forward will present their recommendations.

What is the role of the Bishop during the Special-Called General Conference?

The bishop has the responsibility to preside during all plenary sessions using parliamentary procedures as guided by Roberts Rules of Order. Bishops do not have a vote.

What will the 2019 Special-Called General Conference address?

The 2016 General Conference requested help from the Council of Bishops to find a Way Forward surrounding the topic of human sexuality. After prayer and discernment, the Council of Bishops, which has been given the authority to make such decisions by The Book of Discipline, believed it would be helpful to have a Special Session 2019 that could focus solely on matters related to human sexuality rather than trying to squeeze it

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into the regular quadrennial General Conference 2020 that will have to consider many other items. In addition, The Council of Bishops discerned the need to appoint a Commission on A Way Forward with individuals from across the denomination, representing all voices, to work on a plan to bring to this Special Session. The Special Session will be held February 23-26 in St. Louis Missouri. The Commission on A Way Forward will present their recommendations.

What is the trust clause?

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church is our book of rule to guide the work of the church. Located in Paragraph 2501, the *2016 Book of Discipline* outlines the legal rules that pertain to the “trust clause”. It states that the legal documents (the “deeds”) demonstrating ownership of local church property must contain certain language called the “trust clause”. Essentially, the trust clause states that the local church owns the property, in trust, for the benefit of the entire denomination. The principal reason for this trust clause is to insure that United Methodist local church property will continue to be used for United Methodist Church purposes.

Specifically, the trust clause requires that the property: “Be used, kept, and maintained as a place of divine worship of the United Methodist ministry and members of The United Methodist Church: subject to the Discipline, usage, and ministerial appointments of said Church as from time to time authorized and declared by the General Conference and by the annual conference within whose bounds the said premises are situated.”

The trust clause, as we know it today, first appeared in our Book of Discipline in 1797.

How will changes affect my church?

Local churches will continue to focus on the mission to “Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Local congregations will continue to be United Methodist and be in covenant with other United Methodist Churches around the world to faithfully and fruitfully worship God and tell the story of Jesus in their mission field. In their current form, none of the plans being recommended by the Commission on A Way Forward require a vote in the local church. There are provisions in each plan if the local congregation does not agree with the direction of the Annual Conference; however no votes are required. At this moment, there is no way to know what amendments may be presented, adopted, or how the final potentially amended documents will affect the local church.

What is the timeline for implementation?

Nothing changes immediately following the special-called General Conference. Each of the three proposed plans will approve the next steps and give time for Annual Conference leadership to work together to implement the plans as approved, as well as create space for United Methodists to continue supporting the mission of the Church.

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Is there an Exit plan for all the plans or just for the Traditional Plan? What happens to our property?

Currently The Book of Discipline provides a path for those who want to leave the denomination. The Traditional Plan includes an exit plan. There are amendments coming to the 2019 General Conference that outline an exit path for all the proposed plans.

At this time the Book of Discipline does not allow for people to leave and take the property they hold in trust for the ministry of The United Methodist Church. There are liabilities that a local congregation have, for example, pension liability for all the clergy and surviving spouses who have served them, and the covenant of the tithe to support the connectional ministry.

Why are we talking about this when the Bible is clear? Are we changing the Bible? How can we change the Book of Discipline when the Bible is clear?

No – we are not changing the Bible. We are changing the Book of Law for The United Methodist Church. This has been done several times over the years as we come to understand the teaching of the Bible and the follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. It is true that Bible scholars do not agree on the interpretation of the Biblical narrative.

Will my church have to vote?

None of the plans require a vote unless the local congregation is not in agreement with the decision made by the General Church or the annual conference.

How do the plans affect the Global Church?

Currently, there is a plan for a Global Book of Discipline that will be fundamental to and shared by the global United Methodist Church. The Global Book of Discipline allows for contextualization of practices that align with the core beliefs and reflect the mission field being served. It has always been a part of The United Methodist Church to be adaptable and relevant to the culture that is served. The message of Jesus does not change, but how it is practiced may. This is in alignment with all three plans and allows for the Global Church to continue adapting to their cultural needs.