

FAQ about the 2019 Special Called General Conference

1. What's the difference between a called General Conference and the one in 2020?

¶ 14. Article II.—The General Conference shall meet once in four years at such time and in such place as shall be determined by the General Conference or by its duly authorized committees. . .

A special session of the General Conference, possessing the authority and exercising all the powers of the General Conference, may be called by the Council of Bishops, or in such other manner as the General Conference may from time to time prescribe, to meet at such time and in such place as may be stated in the call. Such special session of the General Conference shall be composed of the delegates to the preceding General Conference or their lawful successors, except that when a particular annual conference or missionary conference shall prefer to have a new election it may do so. The purpose of such special session shall be stated in the call, and only such business shall be transacted as is in harmony with the purpose stated in such call unless the General Conference by a two-thirds vote shall determine that other business may be transacted. - from 2016 *United Methodist Book of Discipline*

2. What is the meaning of the judicial council ruling that other plans could be submitted to the 2019 Special Session of General Conference in addition to those submitted by the Commission on a Way Forward? The July 9, 2018, revised call for a Special Session of the General Conference states that the “purpose of this Special Session of the General Conference shall be limited to receiving and acting upon a report from the Commission on a Way Forward based upon the recommendations of the Council of Bishops.” Judicial Council Decision No. 1360 states that other petitions may be submitted by organizations, and lay/clergy members as long as they are in harmony with the purpose declared for the called General Conference.

The executive committee of the Commission on the General Conference is collaborating with the design team consisting of representatives of the Commission on a Way Forward, Council of Bishops and 2019 Special Session hospitality team to design a process for determining what petitions are in harmony with the called General Conference. The ultimate authority for these decisions lies with the Commission on the General Conference. (For more information see: www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-the-general-conference-determines-petition-process)

3. Will there be other petitions submitted? Judicial Council Decision 1360 rules that petitions in harmony with the purpose of the called General Conference will be received for consideration by the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference delegates. 79 petitions have been submitted in addition to the 48 offered by the Commission on a Way Forward. 18 have been ruled out of order based on format or other errors. If no formatting issues are found with the remaining 61, they will be printed in the Advance Daily Advocate (the official journal of the General Conference). However all decisions about “harmony of petitions” will ultimately be reviewed by the Committee on Reference, in accordance with the Plan of Organization and Rules of Order of the General Conference. Any petitions that they deem to be not “in harmony” will be withdrawn from consideration.

4. Why is this out of the hands of the Council of Bishops? Judicial Council Decision 1360 included a footnote that gave clarity to the question about the relationship between the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops. Footnote 6 reads, “The undertaking of a ‘complete examination’ of the subject of human sexuality presupposes that there will be some kind of report, document or study which supports the ‘possible revision of every paragraph in our Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality,’ which, in turn, presupposes that the Commission (not the Council of Bishops) will put forth legislation to fix the problem. The special called General Conference is to consider ‘their work,’ i.e., whatever the Commission desires to put before General Conference in terms of its ‘complete examination.’”

5. Was each of the three plans representative of a subset of the Commission on a Way Forward? Each of the plans has the support of several Commission on a Way Forward members. Also, Commission members worked as a team on the entire report.

6. Was each of the three plans representative of a subset of the Council of Bishops? Each of the three plans has the support of several bishops.

7. Why weren't the Bishop's votes recorded individually? The process used to determine the Council of Bishops recommendation did not involve formal votes on who would support which of the three models. Rather the active bishops took written straw polls at various points in the discernment process. The only formal vote taken was on a motion and rationale that combined: a) sending forth all three proposals considered by the Commission and the Council of Bishops; b) communicating that a majority of bishops preferred the one church model; and c) including a historical narrative of the Council's discernment process regarding all three plans. The straw votes and the vote on the motion were all done by written ballot without names attached.

8. Once the Commission on a Way Forward report was completed, why did it take several weeks to translate it? The four languages of the General Conference are English, French, Portuguese and Swahili. The Council of Bishops and the Commission on the General Conference felt that releasing the report in the four languages of the General Conference was important as it allowed persons throughout the denomination access to the material in their preferred language simultaneously..

The time required for translation combined with negotiating for less expensive rates by packaging the 2019 and 2020 General Conference translation contracts together resulted in several weeks elapsing between the submission of the Commission on a Way Forward Report to the Commission on the General Conference and the release of the report in four languages.

9. Has the Judicial Council made its final ruling on the three plans? The Council of Bishops' request that the Judicial Council review the constitutionality of the three plans submitted by the Commission on a Way Forward is on the docket for the October 23-26, 2018, Judicial Council meeting. Constitutional issues identified by the Judicial Council with one, two or all three of the plans will enable delegates to make corrective amendments during the February 23-26, 2019 General Conference.

10. What is the order of the presentation of the proposals? We do not yet know the order of agenda for the 2019 Special Session of General Conference. The Commission on the General Conference is working to determine this and will publish it when they deem appropriate.

11. What will be the rules under which the 2019 Special Session of General Conference operates? The 2019 Special Session of General Conference will operate under the current standing rules established by the 2016 General Conference unless sometime during the 2019 Special Session of General Conference two-thirds of the voting delegates vote to change them.

12. What is required to pass a constitutional amendment? The first step in passing a constitutional amendment is for two-thirds of the General Conference to vote for it. Then it goes back to the Annual Conferences for a vote. If two-thirds of the voting members of all 129 Annual Conferences across the globe vote in favor of an amendment affirmed at General Conference, it passes.

13. What is the timeline of implementation of the chosen plan? The timeline depends upon which proposed plan is adopted. Also, revisions changing the timeline could be made to the current proposed plans by delegates of the General Conference. The 2019 Special Session of General Conference has the opportunity to set a direction for the United Methodist Church regarding our approach to LGBTQ matters. Once we choose a direction with a plan, it will take time to fully implement it.

The current version of the *One Church plan* could take effect on January 1, 2020 (See ¶ 508 – Legislation Effective Date). However in order to give the church time to prepare for the changes, it is recommended that the plan not go fully into effect until December 31, 2020.

The current version of the *Connectional Conference plan* would be implemented in the following stages:

- Annual Conferences vote on amendments in 2019 and early 2020
- Jurisdictions and Central Conferences align with a Connectional Conference in 2020
- Bishops align with a Connectional Conference by August 1, 2021
- Annual Conferences not in agreement with their Jurisdiction align with a different Connectional Conference by August 1, 2021
- Local Churches not in agreement with their Annual Conference align with a Connectional Conference by July 1, 2022
- Clergy align with a Connectional Conference by July 1, 2022
- Organizational conferences of Connectional Conferences in Fall 2022
- 1st General Conference under new structure in 2025

The current version of the *Traditionalist Plan* would be implemented in the following stages:

- Each Annual Conference certify that it will “uphold, enforce, and maintain the Discipline’s standards on LGBTQ marriage and ordination” by January-February 2020
- Local Churches and Clergy Discernment and Decision to remain in denomination or be in a self-governing body- March-April, 2020
- 2020 General Conference will address unfinished or deferred work that flows from the 2019 General Conference
- Annual Conferences discern their leadership for 2020-2024 in May-June 2020
- Residential Bishops must approve one of the two statements in ¶ 2801.7 in May-June 2020
- Jurisdictional Conferences will occur in July 2020 for selection of new bishops, based on previous decisions of annual conferences, local churches, clergy and need. Existing bishops will be assigned to self-governing conferences, according to need
- GCFA shall neither receive funds from nor send funds to annual conferences listed under ¶ 2801.3 as of January 2021

14. What happens if none of the plans are approved? *The 2016 Book of Discipline* will remain in effect unless the General Conference votes for a change.

15. What will be done to hold the church together, whatever happens? The three plans put forth by the Commission on a Way Forward report are forms of unity. They are different kinds of unity than we currently are experiencing – but unity nevertheless. Each plan is designed as a way to help unify the church while simultaneously providing sufficient space to respect our differences.

16. What should my church do if the plan isn’t what we want? We are a diverse denomination with a range of understandings about many matters. If the plan approved at the 2019 Special Session of General Conference does not align with personal convictions, persons have the opportunity in our system to work for change through legislative processes beginning in 2020.

17. Will jurisdictions still remain? Jurisdictions will remain if the One Church plan or the Traditional plan is passed. If the Connectional Conference plan is adopted, the current five U.S. jurisdictions will be replaced by three connectional conferences based on perspectives about human sexuality, theology and doctrine.

18. What is the pension liability created by the plans for Annual Conferences? The pension plans of the United Methodist Church have required benefits for current service to be funded as earned since 1982. However, a fully funded pension plan can become *underfunded* due to economic downturns which produce lower than expected earnings or due to increased clergy life expectancy resulting in longer periods of benefit payments which become the responsibility of the annual conference and in turn, the local churches of the annual conference.

When additional contributions are required to restore a pension plan to fully funded status, active congregations that have left the United Methodist Church are no longer a source of funding for these critical contributions. However, these former United Methodist congregations were previously served by pastors who may be currently receiving pension benefits or due benefits in the future at their retirement. Unless a former congregation accepts responsibility for its share of future pension costs associated with pastors that served the congregation prior to the church leaving the denomination, the pension funding obligations for its former pastors will fall on the remaining churches in the conference.

Since future economic conditions and the life expectancies of individual pastors are uncertain, the magnitude of future additional contributions is unknown. However, it is possible to estimate the amount of additional funds needed to outsource the obligations to an insurance company or similar party. Wespath Benefits and Investments has developed a model for estimating an individual church's share of the additional funding needed to transfer the conference's pension liabilities to a commercial insurer.

A petition submitted to the 2019 Special Session of General Conference by the Commission on a Way Forward and initiated by Wespath calls for local churches which leave the denomination to contribute a pro rata share, as determined by the conference, of the conference's long-term pension obligations. In general, transferring market and longevity risks of a pension plan to another party requires paying that party to take on those risks. The proposed pension liability payment compensates the conference for the risks the departing church is leaving behind with the conference.

This concept was recognized and developed as various Way Forward scenarios were considered. Currently, when a church closes or leaves the United Methodist Church, the trust clause calls for the conference to receive all the church's property and assets. However, several petitions being submitted to the 2019 Special Session of General Conference call for relaxing or suspending the trust clause, enabling a church to leave the United Methodist Church and retain its property and assets.

The proposed pension liability payments made by departing churches would help secure the benefit promises made during a history of clergy appointments when those churches were part of the United Methodist Church, and reduce the impact on the Connection of such church departures.

19. If a pastor leaves the denomination, does he or she lose his/her pension? No. Pension benefits are fully vested when earned. However, persons who terminate their membership in the denomination are not eligible to retire. Currently, the benefits earned by such persons may be annuitized or withdrawn based on the provisions of the current plan documents, usually after reaching a certain age. However, clergy whose conference relationship is terminated will not receive plan-funded cost-of-living increases, nor will their pensions increase from post-termination increases in Denominational Average Compensation.

The provisions of the current plan documents are subject to change based on legislation that may be considered and adopted at the Special Session of General Conference in 2019. If a petition developed by Wespath Benefits and Investments and submitted by the Commission on a Way Forward is approved at the 2019 Special Session of General Conference, exiting clergy will not lose pension benefits they have earned, but the form of their benefits may change. The petition calls for accrued pension benefits of a clergyperson who terminates to be converted to an actuarially equivalent account balance. Such conversions help limit a conference's long-term liabilities.

20. Who gets Lake Junaluska? Junaluska and other jurisdictional properties will continue to be owned by the Southeastern Jurisdiction if either the current proposed version of the One Church or Traditional plan is affirmed. If the Connectional Conference plan is passed, such properties will go to the connectional conference the Southeastern Jurisdiction joins.