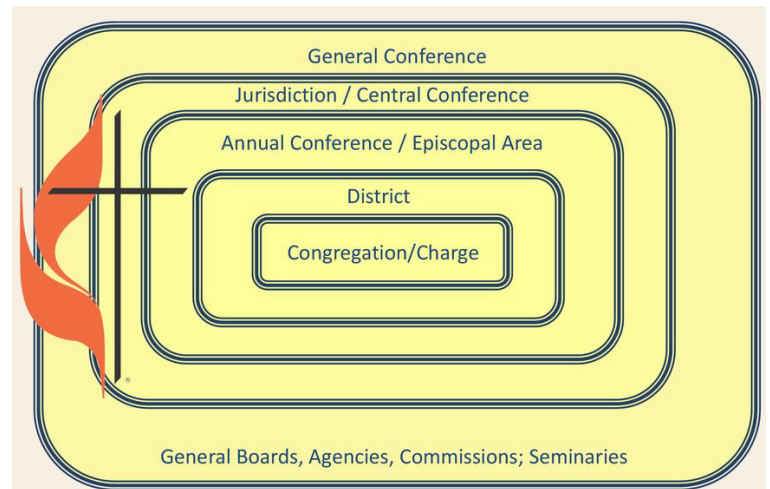


## An Update on Developments in the United Methodist Church

First – a very brief polity overview by Pastor Todd

- How is the UMC organized worldwide?
- What are the responsibilities of each “layer” of organization?
- How are we represented?
- Trust Clause & property in the UMC
- Separation of Powers – like US government



Significant Developments in the UMC over the Past 3-ish Years Related to the Church’s “Stance” on Homosexuality, Including Ordination and Marriage

- Ahead of a specially called 2019 General Conference, the Council of Bishops led “A Way Forward Commission” created by the 2016 General Conference<sup>1</sup> that ultimately introduced three possible plans to the General Conference, including the “One Church” plan, “Connectional Conference” plan and the “Traditionalist” plan that each in their own way promised to deal with ongoing conflict related to (1) the ordination of gay and lesbian people, (2) the right of clergy to perform marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples, (3) the right of churches to conduct same-sex weddings in their facilities, and (4) language in the *Book of Discipline* stating that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”<sup>2</sup>
- 2019 – Significant portions of the “Traditionalist Plan” passed at the General Conference<sup>3</sup>; a small, but not insignificant portion of the “Traditionalist Plan”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishops-ask-for-hold-on-sexuality-debate>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-commission-on-a-way-forward-report-what-you-should-know>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/gc2019-daily-feb-26>

that passed 2019 General Conference was ruled unconstitutional by the Judicial Council, but most of the plan was upheld.<sup>4</sup>

- Since the 2019 General Conference, the fighting has continued (the following are Pastor Todd's characterization of the grievances):
  - Traditionalists have been frustrated by:
    - The Western Jurisdiction's election of a lesbian bishop, Rev. Karen Oliveto<sup>5</sup>
    - Lack of enforcement of/active dissention from provisions of the traditionalist plan passed at the 2019 General Conference by some Annual Conferences and key leaders<sup>6</sup>
    - Perceived wave of centrist/progressive US delegates to 2020 General and Jurisdictional Conference<sup>7</sup>, the possible consequences of which could be repeal of the Traditional Plan, lack of enforcement or weakening of the Traditional Plan, and election of more moderate and progressive bishops
    - Delay of 2020 General Conference<sup>8</sup>
  - Centrists have been frustrated by:
    - Threats of schism from some traditionalists<sup>9</sup>
    - Anti-connectional behavior from some traditionalists – e.g., not accepting appointed clergy<sup>10</sup>, withholding apportionments<sup>11</sup>
    - Continued polarization around human sexuality at the local church level informed by opposing advocacy groups<sup>12</sup>
  - Progressives have been frustrated by:
    - Living with the Traditionalist Plan<sup>13</sup>
    - Delay of 2020 General Conference (but not as frustrated as traditionalists)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-did-the-judicial-council-decide-about-the-traditional-plan>

<sup>5</sup> <https://westernjurisdictionumc.org/western-jurisdiction-elects-karen-oliveto-bishop/>

<sup>6</sup> Examples: <https://www.iaumc.org/newsdetail/15777927>

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/resistance-to-gc2019-spreads>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/us-elections-see-shift-in-gc2020-delegates>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/march/umc-methodist-lgbt-split-conference-delay-global-launch.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://um-insight.net/perspectives/not-the-centrists-and-progressives-i-know/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/update-on-appointment-at-mt-bethel-15295017>

<sup>11</sup> <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/wca-conferences-withhold-global-apportionments/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.adamhamilton.com/blog/a-response-to-thomas-lambrecht/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/resistance-to-gc2019-spreads>

<sup>14</sup> <https://rmnetwork.org/2022/03/03/regarding-postponement-of-general-conference-to-2024/>

- A small amount of documented voting improprieties by Traditionalist-aligned delegates during 2019 General Conference<sup>15</sup>
  - Threats of schism from some traditionalists
  - Anti-connectional behavior from some traditionalists – e.g., not accepting appointed clergy, withholding apportionments
- In January of 2020, a group of United Methodist leaders announced a negotiated agreement called the “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation”<sup>16</sup> that would essentially allow both traditionalist and progressive churches to leave the United Methodist Church with their property<sup>17</sup> as well as remove prohibitive restrictions and statements related to homosexuality from the *Book of Discipline*<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, the *Protocol* provides a mechanism for entire Annual Conferences to leave the United Methodist Church and join new Methodist denominational expressions<sup>19</sup>. Churches could then rejoin the United Methodist Church if they do not agree with their Conference’s decision to leave the denomination.<sup>20</sup> The leaders who came together to create the *Protocol* do not represent any official body within the UMC, however it is the first time that leaders from across the theological spectrum and representing opposing advocacy groups have endorsed the same proposal. This has led many to believe that the *Protocol* stands a good chance of passing the next General Conference.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 General Conference was postponed due to the complexities of holding such a conference during the pandemic (e.g., travel restrictions, difficulty obtaining visas, vaccination status, etc.) and deemed impossible to hold virtually due to various issues including translations, time zones, internet access, etc. This postponement was repeated two more times, so there will now effectively no longer be a 2020 General Conference and the next General Conference will be at the time of the 2024 General Conference.<sup>21</sup> Whether the 2020 General Conference is “postponed” or “cancelled” is a matter that some believe will

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/us/united-methodist-vote.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation> (See 7.b.3.g)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation> (See 1.a)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation> (See 4.a)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation> (See 4.c)

<sup>21</sup> <http://na-email.brtapp.com/viewinsite/ce561de759c690fa87abc42fd617efcd>

be adjudicated by the Judicial Council.<sup>22</sup> This matters because Annual Conferences have elected delegates for the 2020 General Conference. If that General Conference was “postponed,” the previously elected delegates will serve in 2024; if it was “cancelled,” then new delegates will need to be elected by Annual Conferences and an entire quadrennium of elected delegates to General Conference will not represent their constituencies in any capacity.

- Some traditionalist Methodist leaders feel that the General Commission on General Conference, which made the postponement decisions, did not act in good faith in the final postponement decision, but rather wanted to erode support for the *Protocol*.<sup>23</sup> Bishop Wallace-Padgett has stated that she believes the Commission acted in good faith.<sup>24</sup> In response to this postponement, the Global Methodist Church announced its official launch on May 1 of this year.<sup>25</sup> They will now receive disaffiliating United Methodist Churches.
- There is increased uncertainty about the *Protocol* passing at the 2024 General Conference. First, there are concerns about its constitutionality.<sup>26</sup> The Judicial Council is expected to make a “declaratory decision” on the *Protocol* legislation ahead of General Conference.<sup>27</sup> Second, both traditionalist leaning and progressive leaning churches have continued to disaffiliate with the UMC.<sup>28</sup> With the announcement of the May 1 launch of the Global Methodist Church, there may be a new wave of traditionalist defections from the UMC. Third, there is indication from some traditionalist leaning Methodists in the developing world that they do not wish to separate from the UMC.<sup>29</sup> Thus, part of the traditionalist coalition that passed the Traditional Plan in 2019, may not support the *Protocol* – or should it come to pass, leave to be part of the Global Methodist Church.

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<sup>22</sup> [https://mailchi.mp/10920c6f0002/team-caffeine-march-07-8858001?e=\[UNIQID\]](https://mailchi.mp/10920c6f0002/team-caffeine-march-07-8858001?e=[UNIQID])

<https://hackingchristianity.net/2022/03/relief-or-ruin-general-conference-postponed-to-2024.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://juicyecumenism.com/2022/03/03/filibuster-umc-general-conference/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://na-email.brtapp.com/viewinsite/ce561de759c690fa87abc42fd617efcd>

<sup>25</sup> <https://globalmethodist.org/global-methodist-church-sets-official-launch-date/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/when-pandemic-ends-confusion-in-church-will-remain>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/bishops-request-declaratory-decision-from-judicial-council-on-protocol-legislation>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/umc-leave-church-methodist-split-lgbt-conference-protocol.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/statement-of-church-unity-from-united-methodists-in-africa/>

- Additionally, there is a disagreement about whether entire Annual Conferences already have the right to leave the United Methodist Church. Rev. Scott Jones, bishop of the Texas Annual Conference, suggested in a letter to his Annual Conference that they do<sup>30</sup>, the Bulgaria-Romania Provisional Annual Conference already voted to leave the UMC<sup>31</sup> over the objection of their bishop<sup>32</sup> and the Council of Bishops has asked the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision on the matter ahead of the 2022 wave of Annual Conference meetings<sup>33</sup>. If the Judicial Council affirms Bishop Jones' reading of church law, it is conceivable that some Annual Conference could vote to leave the United Methodist Church, but it remains unclear what the voting threshold to leave would be as well as other particulars about such a vote.<sup>34</sup> Our own Bishop Wallace-Padgett has indicated she wishes for North Alabama churches to remain together through 2024 and work towards a solution that will "allow us to move forward together".<sup>35</sup>
- Finally, there is disagreement about whether regularly scheduled Jurisdictional Conferences can be held in the United States if the General Conference is postponed. Jurisdictional Conference is where bishops are elected and assigned to Annual Conferences. Retiring bishops have created vacancies and some bishops are now serving more than one Annual Conference, including our own. Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett is now the presiding bishop of both the North Alabama and Holston Conferences.<sup>36</sup> Delegations elected to Jurisdictional Conference around the United States in the previous round of elections are widely viewed to have been unfavorable for traditionalists within the church.<sup>37</sup> This matter is also before the Judicial Council.<sup>38</sup>

So, what now?

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.txcumc.org/newsdetail/bishop-jones-addresses-tac-challenges-16408979>

<sup>31</sup> <https://methodist.bg/the-bulgaria-romania-annual-conference-ratifies-a-resolution-to-leave-the-united-methodist-church/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.umc-cse.org/download/EkBqyxt0iqw/220407-BG-RO-Separation-official-en.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/church-court-adds-annual-conference-questions-to-docket>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2022/03/11/16/12/cob-request-for-declaratory-decision-march-7-022.ashx?la=en&hash=D2FE6421B39D2A8F83BB6D0DD2C02FE4FB952B>

<sup>35</sup> <http://na-email.brtapp.com/viewinsite/ce561de759c690fa87abc42fd617efcd>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.umcna.org/postdetail/message-from-bishop-wallace-padgett-adding-the-holston-conference-15257305>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/us-elections-see-shift-in-gc2020-delegates>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/bishops-discern-ways-forward-march-15-16396297>

- There is really no “new” decision to make. You may see news of some churches deciding to disaffiliate from the UMC, but this option has been available to us since the passage of a new disaffiliation procedure at the 2019 General Conference<sup>39</sup> and the option to transfer to another Methodist denomination has long been an option in the *Book of Discipline*.<sup>40</sup> There are significant costs associated with disaffiliation, including 2 years of connectional giving, and paying the North Alabama Conference “unfunded pension liability,” and other possible repayments/fees detailed in par. 2553 of the *Book of Discipline*.<sup>41</sup>
- Wait, watch, and pray – As you can see, this is a fluid, developing situation. Should the *Protocol* pass at the 2024 General Conference, the North Alabama Conference will most likely vote on whether to leave the United Methodist Church. According to the *Protocol*, the North Alabama Conference would have to vote at a threshold of 57% to leave the United Methodist Church and join the traditionalist Global Methodist Church. Given the threshold defined in the *Protocol*, Pastor Todd’s assessment is that it remains uncertain which way the North Alabama Conference would vote. Whatever is decided by our Annual Conference, we will still have the option to either revert back to the United Methodist Church or leave to join the Global Methodist Church. The Administrative Council has an important role in this decision. According to the *Protocol*, they would decide: (1) whether or not to hold any vote regarding a dissent from affiliation decision of the North Alabama Conference, (2) if such a vote is held, whether the Administrative Council or a called Church Conference (entire membership of the church) should be the body to conduct such a vote, and (3) what voting threshold should be used in such an affiliation/reaffiliation vote – simple plurality or supermajority (2/3 vote). Currently, the *Protocol* gives congregations until the end of 2024<sup>42</sup> to dissent from their Annual Conference’s affiliation decision, but Pastor Todd believes that General Conference would likely update this date to 2028 to reflect the four year delay in taking up the *Protocol* legislation since its release. Thus, it is not likely a decision we would have to make quickly.

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<sup>39</sup> <https://cdn.cokesbury.com/images/community/cokesburyportals/2016boderrata.pdf> (See par. 2553)

<sup>40</sup> *Book of Discipline*, par. 2548.2

<sup>41</sup> <https://cdn.cokesbury.com/images/community/cokesburyportals/2016boderrata.pdf> (See par. 2553)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation> (See 4.c.1)