

Analysis of the Commission on a Way Forward Report
Bishop Scott J. Jones

Appreciation

The members and moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward are to be commended for significant service to The United Methodist Church. They were a deliberately diverse group drawn from all parts of our global church. They had significantly different theological and ethical perspectives and they conducted their work in a Spirit-filled, disciplined and focused way. Their mission, vision and scope put the key values first and they were faithful to those values. They accomplished what the church needed: the articulation of three options for a way forward that provide the delegates to General Conference with the material they need to make the best possible decision.

General Conference Process

The report of the Commission on a Way Forward has been published. For your convenience, we have excerpted portions of the report as an executive summary. Bishop Jones has also written analyses of the whole report and each of the three plans. All of these documents are available at www.txcumc.org/wayforward.

The Commission did not recommend one plan over the others. The Commission's report does include the information that the Council of Bishops voted to recommend the One Church Plan. It did so by a 37-24 vote.

A design team is working to suggest the process for considering the petitions at General Conference. The rules of the General Conference are the rules that were in effect at the adjournment of the 2016 General Conference. How the General Conference will use those rules to consider the three plans and the additional petitions has not yet been decided.

The Judicial Council has been asked to issue declaratory decisions regarding the constitutionality of each of the three plans. It meets October 23-26, 2018. It could rule some aspects of the plans unconstitutional.

The Advanced Daily Christian Advocate with the petitions which will be considered must be sent to delegates by November 26, 2018.

General Conference meets February 23, 2019 for prayer and February 24-26, 2019 for business. The Judicial Council ruled that General Conference must determine which petitions are in harmony with the call and thus will be considered. By a two-thirds vote the General Conference can consider matters not in harmony with the call.

No Good Solution—only winners and losers

Taken together, the three plans and the Commission's whole report demonstrate that there is no solution that resolves our disagreements. There is no "win-win" option. When General Conference 2019 is over, there will be only winners and losers. If the One Church Plan is adopted, many progressive United Methodists will be pleased because the church is moving in the direction they have advocated for forty years. At the same time, many conservatives will leave the UMC because they cannot live in a church whose teaching on marriage includes same-gender marriage. If the Traditional Plan is adopted, many progressives will continue their principled disobedience and the church will face increased numbers of trials and disruptions. If the Connectional Conference Plan is adopted, ratification of the constitutional amendments will be difficult and complicated.

Decisive Turn

I do not believe that any of the plans resolves our differences. The One Church Plan is not a stable, permanent solution for unity. Its key provisions change the location of our conflict to more local decision-making bodies. It does represent a decisive turn that changes our doctrine about sanctification and marriage and starts down a path that will eventually include full inclusion of LGBTQ persons living in committed marriages.

Impasse, Disobedience and Distraction

In several places the Commission's report refers to our current "impasse." It is true that decisions about homosexuality have been made by every General Conference since 1972. But the church has consistently maintained its current teaching each time the matter came up for consideration. Our current impasse is the result of principled disobedience by clergy, bishops, annual conferences and the Western Jurisdictional Conference to the rules of the church. It is principled because those engaging in disobedience are doing so intentionally and driven by the conviction that full inclusion of LGBTQ persons is God's will for the church. The last time bishops and conferences could not accept the decision of the General Conference they left and formed a new denomination. Those engaging in disobedience today feel called to disrupt the church for the sake of their cause and insist that the whole UMC adopt their view as a matter of biblical justice.

Contextualization and the Gospel

The Commission's vision seeks to "allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible". It is presumed that context is a cultural term linked to geography. In reality, there are churches in each of the 50 states that are conservative on issues of human sexuality. There are churches in each of the 50 US states that are progressive on issues of human sexuality. While the relative proportion of the population's views vary in different parts of the country, it is possible to effectively preach a conservative version of the gospel in the most liberal parts of the country and to preach a liberal version of the gospel in the most conservative parts of the country. Historical trends, including theological education, election of bishops and decisions made by annual conferences have led United Methodist conferences to take different approaches to Christian teaching over time. The differences among us are primarily theological and not contextual.

New Forms of Unity

The word "unity" is often invoked in the discussions about the way forward. Paragraph 101 of *The Book of Discipline, 2016* says "We are a worldwide denomination united by doctrine, discipline and mission through our connectional covenant." The principled disobedience by bishops and conferences of the church has already broken our unity.

The three plans propose three different forms of unity. The One Church Plan offers a unity that reduces doctrinal agreement. The Traditional Plan offers a unity that emphasizes accountability to our connectional covenant. The Connectional Conference Plans offers a reduced commitment to the covenant while maintaining key connecting points.