

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS IN THE PEWS

One of the challenges of Q & A is that for many questions there are a multitude of answers. Because of different perspectives of the causes and different speculations of possible future scenarios, it is easy to veer from facts, which only go so far to opinions and speculations. The following answers contain them all: fact and opinion, information and speculation. They are presented here as somewhat of a captured dialogue of members of the Future Discernment Task Force in an effort to understand one another. One of our members spoke of the current crisis as a couple in marriage counseling. The problems presented could be viewed by one couple as a marital impasse with perpetual disagreement about an issue or issues, but the stress of the impasse being significantly less than the stress and loss of dissolving the marriage. Another couple could experience the same perpetual disagreements could be viewed as irreconcilable differences that result in divorce.

1. How did we get here? Why did we get here?

Response #1

In 1972 the General Conference entered a new paragraph in the *Book of Discipline* stating that “...the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian Teachings.” Based upon this paragraph, restrictions have been imposed regarding the ordination and appointment of professing homosexuals and conducting ceremonies between same sex couples in United Methodist facilities. Since 1972, the paragraph and restrictions have been debated during every session of General Conference, including the 2019 special session of General Conference limited to these debates. Petitions since at least 1996 seeking to eliminate the paragraph have failed consistently by a 60% to 40% margin.

Additionally, a small collection of pastors and bishops have conducted such ceremonies in violation of the *Book of Discipline*. A professing homosexual was elected as bishop and assigned to an episcopal area within the Western Jurisdiction of the U.S. All ordained pastors in the United Methodist Church took vows to uphold the rules contained in the *Book of Discipline*. These violations have been cited by pastors and bishops as one of the reasons for seeking disaffiliation among both local churches, pastors, and bishops.

During the 2019 special session a pathway was established by which local churches could disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church with its facilities and financial reserves, subject to certain conditions being met. On May 1, 2022, the Global Methodist Church was established as an alternative Methodist denomination for disaffiliating local churches. The pathway is limited in time—expiring December 31, 2023. General Conference does not meet until May 2024 when other opportunities for disaffiliation might be established.

These district meetings have been scheduled through the Future Discernment Task Force to provide useful information to clergy and laity concerning the debates, the temporary pathway for local church disaffiliation, procedures for clergy to disaffiliate, and what the future might bring. The scheduled termination of the disaffiliation pathway for local churches is a primary reason for the dissemination of information through these district meetings.

Response #2

It can be argued that the potential for division within The United Methodist Church was created when the church itself was established in 1968. For among the features of the new denomination was the concept of theological pluralism, a grand experiment in being a “big tent” for both ideas and expressions of faith. Unfortunately, as the practicalities of church life unfolded in the years that followed, what was intended to be a strength also revealed an inherent weakness, in that without clear directives in some places, both opinions and practices varied dramatically between both individuals and factions within the broader church, making genuine unity difficult indeed. Along with differences over questions regarding abortion, euthanasia, war, and other social issues, as well as theological and biblical interpretations, one question became the most pressing presenting issue, however, leading to much of the current impasse, namely, how to deal with same-sex orientation, practice, and identity when it comes to marriage and ordination.

The first sign of that division came in 1972 when the four-year old denomination considered its newly developed Social Principles at the General Conference held in Atlanta, Georgia. For it was in that assembly that a study commission moved to recognize that homosexuals are persons of sacred worth who are welcome in the fellowship of the church and whose rights ought to be protected. Though nearly everyone agreed upon that motion, it was what was *not* said that created a problem for some, specifically, the matter of offering further clarity about sexual activity between two persons of the same gender. A motion made on the plenary floor of the conference, approved by a clear majority, thus added the words, “though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Subsequent General Conferences accordingly began to work out the practical application of those words, though initially at least the effort was made to avoid specific prohibitions, trusting all to act “in good faith.” But the lack of specificity soon became problematic as, faced with an openly gay candidate for ministry, at least one bishop in 1982 ruled that nothing within the *Book of Discipline* disqualified a person on the basis of their sexual expression, and the Judicial Council upheld that bishop’s ruling. In turn, thousands of petitions came to the 1984 General Conference that sought to close the gap and make it clear that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” (emphasizing behavior as opposed to the sexual orientation of a person) could not be ordained, and such legislation was adopted by the Conference.

And since that time, the question in one form or another has marked every quadrennial meeting of the General Conference, with petitions seeking to eliminate the “incompatibility” clause failing consistently by a 60% to 40% margin. Nonetheless, acts of ecclesial disobedience, rooted in a conception of social justice, have continued to be practiced. Conflict within the United States intensified with the Supreme Court Obergefell Decision in 2015 which legalized same-sex marriage, but even before that decision, two whole jurisdictional conferences voted to act as if the Disciplinary restrictions regarding human sexuality were not binding. At the same time, the make-up of the General Conference shifted as the ratio of delegates from growing areas in Africa, which largely leans traditional, began to challenge those allocated to the American church, which favors a progressive stance, but which has also been in a forty-year numerical decline. Efforts to liberalize the church’s position at the 2016 General Conference thus failed, leading to a suspension of all motions regarding sexuality in favor of bishops forming a commission to arrive at a workable resolution. Perhaps symbolizing the continued division, however, just weeks after that conference the Western Jurisdiction in 2016 elected an openly partnered lesbian, Karen Oliveto, as a bishop of the church. Though the Judicial Council subsequently ruled that her election was irregular, she continues to serve in the episcopal office, subject only to the Western College of Bishops which share her perspective and has chosen not to hold her accountable.

The “Commission on the Way Forward” thus began its work in late 2016 with 32 members, developing three sketches for how the denomination could find its future. Endorsed by the Council of Bishops and a majority of the commission, the “One Church Plan” emerged as the favorite solution for many, essentially proposing a local option approach in which pastors, congregations, and conferences could all determine on their own what their position on gay marriage and ordination should be. That plan was not supported at the 2019 called Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis, however, which endorsed instead the Traditional plan, reinforcing the prior position of the church, and actually strengthening the enforcement of it. That conference also approved a pathway by which local churches could disaffiliate with its properties from the United Methodist Church for reasons of conscience, subject to certain conditions being met and for a limited period, currently set to expire in December 2023.

Anticipating further conflict at the 2020 General Conference, a small group led by an African bishop, and representative of all sides of the issue, agreed upon a Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation in early 2020. Though it showed great promise for enabling an orderly and amicable division within United Methodism that could end the conflict, unfortunately the pandemic made meeting that year impossible and the Commission on General Conference likewise postponed that meeting three times. It is now scheduled to convene in 2024. In the interim, however, local congregations and, in the case of Bulgaria-Romania, at least one entire annual conference, have already begun leaving The United Methodist Church to reaffiliate with the Global Methodist Church, a new Wesleyan denomination, which was legally created

on May 1, 2022, after many years of work by the Wesleyan Covenant Association which began in 2016.

Differences over LGBTQ issues have similarly revealed that there are other significant points of contention between groups within our denomination, including questions revolving around the trust clause for local church properties, the authority and tenure of bishops, the role of general agencies, and more deeply perhaps, how to read and interpret key passages of the scriptures. Weary of a half century of struggle, thus, some congregations, including both a progressive and a conservative church within the Texas Conference, have already left to find a closer affinity group with other Christians. In their perspective, the grand experiment of theological pluralism has not proved to be sustainable, thus, and that has brought us to the place where we are today, of considering how best to reconcile our differences, including the possibility of as amiable a separation as possible.

Response #3

One way to understand how we got to this point is to acknowledge for many people both inside and outside the UMC, attitudes have changed about homosexuality. Over the course of the 50 years since the incompatibility clause was added to the BoD many people have moved in their understanding. Doctors and Psychologists now speak of sexual orientation as a given or unchosen in all of us. This matches the personal experience of people. Many people both in society at large and in the UMC do not see sexual orientation as a moral issue. Additionally, same gender marriage is now legal in the US. Pastors and congregations want to be able to provide spiritual care for their church members and families, including the rite of Christian Marriage. Biblical interpretations that once justified slavery, polygamy, holy war, stoning people to death, prohibitions against women in leadership, forbidding remarriage after divorce or interracial marriage or interfaith marriage and many other biblical justifications have moderated. Not all people of course moderated their interpretations, and we find ourselves not of one mind in our biblical interpretation in relationship to the full participation of gay people in the life of the church.

Response #4

The United Methodist Church has spent much of our time together at General Conferences debating the current restrictions on gay and lesbian participation in United Methodist Churches. Current restrictions include the prohibition of a United Methodist pastor officiating at a same gender wedding, a United Methodist Church hosting a same gender wedding, and a non-celibate gay or lesbian person being considered for candidacy of pastoral ministry or ordination to pastoral ministry. These restrictions seem unjust to some who have chosen to disregard these restrictions. The restrictions seem unalterable and biblical to others who thus feel the violation of these restrictions to be chargeable offenses. The absence of disciplinary measures in some places is a point of much stress.

2. *What are the possibilities for the elimination of the existing paragraph and restrictions regarding human sexuality during the 2024 General Conference which could resolve these issues?*

Response # 1

Delegations from the African Central Conferences consistently support retaining the existing paragraph and restrictions regarding human sexuality. U.S. delegations have been mixed in their support. The 2020 elected delegations from Africa represent 32.3% of total delegates and this percentage has been increasing due to membership growth among African Central Conferences and membership decline among the U.S. jurisdictional conferences. The African Central Conferences for decades have depended upon financial support from General Conference which would be jeopardized if these Central Conferences disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church. It is unlikely that in 2024 delegates from Africa would be a significantly smaller percentage thereby making it possible for the paragraph and restrictions to be eliminated.

Response # 2

In many respects, changing the current language of the *Discipline* with respect to human sexuality issues depends upon how central conferences, and in particular, those in Africa, will exercise their considerable strength in voting. The majority of African Methodists have indicated a desire to remain in the United Methodist Church through at least the 2024 General Conference, and as they have largely held to traditional views, that would suggest that changing the current wording will be a challenge, at least until the bulk of African churches move, as it is expected, into the Global Methodist Church. Africans have also made it clear that though they do depend upon the financial support of the denomination, their votes on such questions will not be swayed by the threat of financial losses. And if the 2024 General Conference is classified as the regularly scheduled assembly, and not as a postponed 2020 meeting, the allocation of delegates from Africa will only increase, matching the membership gains there, making it even harder for the restrictive language to be removed as progressives and some centrists within the denomination have long argued.

3. *What are the expectations of financial sustainability for the United Methodist Church and for the Global Methodist Church?*

Response #1

The financial stability of the United Methodist Church is continually examined by the Economic Advisory Committee of the General Council on Finance and Administration. It recommends levels of apportionments and spending for the General Church every four years and has developed its recommendations for the next quadrennium beginning in 2024. Projected apportionments and spending have been decreased to ensure the financial sustainability of the United Methodist Church.

We are not aware of any financial projections for the Global Methodist Church. As with the United Methodist Church, connectional operations are primarily funded through apportionments assigned to the local churches, administered through annual conferences. There is no legislated obligation for the funding of Global Methodist Church operations from the United Methodist Church. Disaffiliating local churches, as part of the required conditions, must make payment in full of the past and current year's apportionments-through 2022 or 2023, depending upon the date of disaffiliation. This priority of apportionment payments to the United Methodist Church, combined with an unknown loss of membership among disaffiliating churches, is expected to delay apportionment payments to the Global Methodist Church for many or most disaffiliating local churches.

At present, the financial sustainability of the Global Methodist Church, with the financial demands of operating annual conferences, conducting General Conferences, and maintaining essential operations of selected general agencies (e.g., cash flow, IRS group ruling administration for local churches, judicial counsel operations, communications, etc.) is challenged. Delays in local church disaffiliations because of Global Methodist Church financial uncertainties aggravate the possibilities of financial sustainability.

Response #2

Organizers of the Global Methodist Church have likewise considered how to create a financially sustainable denomination, aided in no small part by a substantially reduced administrative structure and by restricting connectional askings or apportionments to no more than 1.5% of a congregation's annual giving for the denomination, and no more than 5% for the annual conference. Support for work outside of the United States, including bishops who will serve such areas, is also being developed along a covenant sharing basis with annual conferences and congregations in America. Though the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation originally called for a sharing of denominational assets, recognizing that reserves have come from the faithful stewardship of Methodists of all theological positions over the decades, the thrice-repeated postponement of the General Conference now makes it extremely unlikely that the proposed \$25 million contribution to the Global Methodist Church out of the hundred-million dollar assets of the United Methodist Church envisioned in the Protocol will occur.

Response #3

The United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church will need to adjust spending and budgeting based on the size of the denominations once it is determined the size of each denomination. Both denominations are presently committed to no greater percentage of apportionments than local churches are presently experiencing. Much of the work will need to take place on the spending side.

4. *What impact have these debates had on the ability of the United Methodist Church in making disciples of Jesus Christ?*

Response #1

There have been several studies of the impact of elevating the importance of social issues over disciple-making among Protestant denominations in the U.S. One 2001 contribution to this literature is *Reclaiming the Great Commission* by Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley. The authors conclude that when a denomination becomes best known for its stances on social issues, at the expense of a focus upon disciple-making, it will experience persistent decline.

The United Methodist Church within its jurisdictional conferences is an almost perfect example of this prediction. It was in 2016 that the General Conference announced its scheduled 2019 special General Conference for the sole purpose of resolving issues surrounding the paragraph in the *Book of Discipline*, the restrictions, and the disobedience of bishops and clergy. Between General Conference 2004 and 2016, the annual average decline in worship attendance was 57,000. Between 2016 and 2019, the annual average decline in worship attendance was 96,000—a 68% increase in the speed of the annual decline within our worship services before Covid-19 hit.

Response #2

There is no doubt that outreach to a world in need of the grace of Jesus Christ must be intentional. It does not happen as naturally as even caring for one's own congregation. Piety and Practice are the two pillars upon which the Methodist movement was built. United Methodists on various sides of the current debate attempt to remain faithful to those pillars of Methodism, but in doing so, we have admittedly taken our eyes away from intentional discipling. To that extent or to measure the impact is difficult to do, but to acknowledge the need for intentionality in reaching our neighbors with the good news of Jesus Christ is essential.

5. *If a congregation votes to disaffiliate, do we know what percentage of the membership will choose to remain United Methodist and what percentage of annual giving might that represent?*

Response #1

It is unclear what the overall percentages might be as it will vary from church to church. Existing evidence suggests that most members are not well informed about the advantages and disadvantages of disaffiliation. It is unclear what information has been reviewed within congregations considering disaffiliation. The paragraph and the restrictions concern issues that many in the pews do not consider very important to them in the life of the church. Surveys show that the percentage of family income given to the congregation increases the longer the family has been in that congregation. If the

strength of one's ties to the United Methodist Church get stronger with the length of time one has been a member, those choosing to remain United Methodist could be among the larger givers.

Response #2

There are a lot of unknowns in this matter for every congregation. Sadly, we do anticipate that a vote of this magnitude will result in some members leaving the church to join another church and even more heart-breaking is that some will choose to leave the church and not join another church. As mentioned above, once a congregation has discerned where the Spirit would have them align, they will need to be intentional about reaching the mission field (those in the proximate area where God has called them to serve) with the good news of the grace of Jesus Christ.

6. Isn't United Methodist membership in areas outside the "Bible belt" declining rapidly? Isn't one of the reasons is a lack of emphasis on making disciples?

Response #1

Based upon the UM news reports and the election of a lesbian bishop to serve the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference, one would predict more rapid decline in United Methodist membership in the Western Jurisdiction, perhaps followed by the Northeastern and North Central jurisdictions, compared to the more traditional or conservative jurisdictions—Southeast and South Central. Membership among the African Central Conferences would be unaffected by a focus upon issues related to sexuality. The following table supports these predictions.

Membership in the United Methodist Church

			2012-2020
	2012	2020	Change
North Central	1,355,960	1,198,981	-11.6%
Northeastern	1,337,869	1,177,148	-12.0%
South Central	1,748,308	1,660,272	-5.0%
Southeastern	2,909,072	2,766,058	-4.9%
Western	369,347	315,674	-14.5%
Total U.S.	7,720,556	7,118,133	-7.8%
Africa	4,200,317	5,298,690	26.1%
Europe	64,818	54,549	-15.8%
Philippines	220,438	141,897	-35.6%
Total	12,206,129	12,613,269	3.3%

The percentage decline in membership in the Western Jurisdiction between 2012 and 2020 is almost three times than of Southeastern and South Central Jurisdictions. The African Central Conferences reported a gain in membership of over 26% which more than offset the decline among all the jurisdictions and other central conferences, resulting a net gain of 3.34% in membership.

These results demonstrate the fact that there is a penalty suffered by jurisdictions that have a focus upon social issues at the expense of making disciples—the penalty being a loss of membership and the accompanying reductions in disciple-making. The *Book of Discipline* assigns the task of holding bishops accountable for the lack of enforcement of its restrictions to the jurisdictions’ Committees on Episcopacy. The lack of accountability among some jurisdictions has resulted in decline. Membership in the entire Western Jurisdiction is now less than that of the combined North and South Georgia annual conferences. The penalty suffered by the UMC has been severe.

Response #2

Many of the denominational and independent churches in the United States have been declining for quite some time. There are several sociological reasons that can be cited for these declines. However, we would benefit greatly by examining places in the world where the church is growing and even looking more carefully at churches in the United States that are growing. Intentionally outwardly focused churches that find ways to grow bigger (new members joining regularly) and smaller (designing small group ministries to connect new members early in their participation in the church) at the

same time seem to be common elements. We are declining, but we are not dead. We have a call to make disciples of Jesus Christ and we cannot forsake that.

7. Isn't What is the impact of church disaffiliations on college faith communities like Wesley Foundations?

The answer to this question will vary dramatically between annual conferences. How Wesley Foundations are organized, who owns the property, if they are incorporated, and if the Wesley Foundations are registered as independent 501c3s will all be factors across the nation.

The disaffiliation paragraphs in the *Book of Discipline* pertain only to churches, not to Wesley Foundations, so Wesley Foundations will remain ministries of the Texas Annual Conference.

The Texas Annual Conference currently has eight Wesley Foundations, seven of which are supported by conference apportionments. All of the financially supported Wesley Foundations receive apportionments in amounts that account for at least half of their annual budgets. The combined conference funding for all campus ministries totals approximately \$1,050,000. For many years, Wesley Foundations have understood that they should not expect any increases in funding from the Conference. Wesley Foundations raise an additional amount of just under \$600,000 to help meet the actual costs of their ministry needs.

About 53% of the apportionment is designated for salaries and benefits of appointed clergy. Of the 47% that is designated to programs and operations, a significant portion goes to hard costs like maintaining buildings and property (utilities, insurance, etc.) and other costs typically associated with a church like non-clergy staff. A sudden, significant decrease in funds could have far-reaching, long-term effects on the Wesley Foundations and the conference.

The disaffiliating churches will significantly impact the apportionment dollars raised by the TAC in 2023 and beyond. As the TAC responds to the financial pressures of being a smaller conference, it will be up to the members of the remaining TAC as to the extent Wesley Foundations will have to bear that burden. Historically, in other conferences, when there are sudden financial pressures, there is a temptation to close and sell Wesley Foundation properties to help ease those burdens. Even in this conference, where Wesley Foundations are generally considered vital ministries, 5 campus ministries have been defunded in the last 15 years.

Wesley Foundations will undoubtedly need the direct support of churches remaining in their UM districts in addition to conference apportionments. Churches with no Wesley Foundations in their districts could help by over-paying their campus ministry apportionment or “adopting” a Wesley Foundation to support directly. Some Wesley Foundations will also be contacting churches that are leaving the UMC to talk to

them about supporting Wesley Foundations as typically the only Wesleyan expression of Christian theology on public campuses.

Wesley Foundations will be relying on the additional financial support to happen quickly so it doesn't interrupt the important ministry they do to make disciples all across the conference.