

CHRISTIAN CONFERRING

Discerning United Methodism's Path through a Pandemic

STATEMENT FROM DELEGATES TO THE NEXT GENERAL AND JURISDICTIONAL CONFERENCES

Extraordinary possibility resides in The United Methodist Church. We are excited about what God has in store for the people called Methodists! Despite our current challenges, as followers of Jesus Christ we are people of hope. Empowered by the Spirit and grounded in the extravagant grace of the One who loves us into freedom, we proclaim that the best days for The United Methodist Church are before us not behind.

We have learned acutely this past year that the *Book of Discipline* does not anticipate the world in which we now live. Now is the time to re-imagine how we want to be church together. This is an opportunity for adaptive change: we will not legislate our way into renewal and missional vibrancy through technical adjustments and amendments to the *Discipline* alone.

We are not convinced that the [Bishops' call](#) to special 2021 General and Jurisdictional Conferences best positions the UMC for maximum faithfulness to our mission. The Council's proposals — including not electing new bishops until 2024 — limit rather than empower delegates through Christian conferencing to make transformational decisions that shape our shared future. Therefore, we:

"COME NOW!
LET'S LOOK AT
THE CHOICES
BEFORE YOU,
SAYS THE
LORD"

— Isaiah 1:18 (The Inclusive Bible)

1 Call upon the Council of Bishops to work with delegates in a transparent manner in order to build consensus in shaping the missional, administrative, and financial agenda for this liminal time (2021-2024). **Delegates and bishops need to confer together collaboratively and transparently as stewards of our connection.** We believe that the Bishops' plan, in its current form, constitutes an "episcopal overreach" that constrains the General Conference's "legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional" (§116) and the Jurisdictional Conference's duty to "elect bishops and to cooperate in carrying out such plans for their support" (§27).

2 Request the Council of Bishops to call regular sessions of the Jurisdictional Conferences for the summer of 2021, in order to elect new bishops and board members of agencies (§26 and §521.2). If the Council of Bishops chooses not to call regular sessions of the Jurisdictional Conferences in summer 2021, then we call upon delegates to invoke §521.1 and call a special session for the purpose of electing bishops and board members.

3 Urge our bishops to prioritize the **disciplines of spiritual leadership** named in §403.1 a - e): "a vital and renewing spirit, an enquiring mind and commitment to the teaching office, a vision for the Church, a prophetic commitment for the transformation of the Church and the world, a passion for the unity of the church." Out of these missional disciplines emerges the ministry of administration (§403.1.f) and financial management.

Holy conferencing is the Methodist way. We believe that, when delegates meet, it is essential for them to **deliberate, discern, and decide**. The Constitution grants legislative authority to the conferences. Unfortunately, the Bishops' call to special General Conference includes legislation without means for the delegates to deliberate prior to vote (due to the virtual format to suspend the rules and authorize paper balloting). **Process matters.** And the call to special Jurisdictional Conferences, for the purpose of retiring bishops and receiving coverage announcements, ignores the need for new bishops and agency members. **Leadership matters.**

ECHOING ISAIAH'S PROPHETIC WORDS: COME, LET US REASON TOGETHER.

Adopted by the following delegations: **Greater New Jersey, New England, Northern Illinois, Iowa, Oregon-Idaho, Michigan** (as of March 18th)

RATIONALE

I. COLLABORATION, CHRISTIAN CONFERENCING, AND CONCILIAR LEADERSHIP

The Bishops' call to a special session of the General Conference clearly violates the separation of powers. Simply put, bishops don't write legislation. The proposed format all but eliminates the capacity for the conference to function as a deliberative body. The virtual May 8th conference to suspend the rules and authorize mail-in balloting narrows the legislative process considerably and limits the work of the legislators. In essence, the only choice available is an "up or down vote" of the legislation written by the Bishops, who are supposed to be non-voting (and unbiased) presiders at the conference. **As currently structured, the May 8th called session would not be a General Conference of delegates, but rather a referendum of the Bishops' legislation, although bishops do not compose or vote on legislation.**

DISENFRANCHISING

The called session (to gain quorum to suspend the rules and use paper balloting) eliminates the deliberative, legislative capacity of the General Conference. Under the proposed process, there is no holy conferencing by delegates. The question remains: Is the Council of Bishops inviting delegates into conversation, consultation, and conferencing? Or more simply put: Is the Council asking or telling us?

ADMINISTRATIVE TINKERING

While people suffer throughout the world in unimagined ways, the proposed General Conference and special session Jurisdictional Conferences would gather for largely administrative purposes (i.e., budgets, retirement of bishops, and conference committees). Given the UMC's ability to persist during the past year, we wonder whether the proposed legislation alone is urgent enough to necessitate special sessions? If we were to gather globally, should not we also be addressing the most pressing issues of our day?

DISEMPOWERING

Instead of empowering duly-elected delegates to lead during these uncertain times, the opposite is the case. Delegates elected during the monumental annual conferences following the highly contentious 2019 special General Conference have not yet been seated. The proposed 2021 sessions further delays the voice of the people. Is not this precisely the right time to empower new Episcopal and agency board leadership?

The idea that delegates are called to attend a special session of the General Conference, sit and listen, and then vote without discussion is a violation of the principles of Holy Conferencing on which the General Conference is established. It is a theological principle of Methodism that through honest (and oftentimes hard) discussion, the Holy Spirit is able to guide and direct the working of the Church. The Church believes that the Spirit can and will intervene in our attempts to speak with one another and aid us in our collective discernment. To place a gag order on the body of the General Conference is, in effect, attempting to silence the work of the Spirit that is found in the process of holy conferencing. It is to abandon our historic roots, and to leave no room for the Spirit to work within us as a body.

II. ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR AN UNCERTAIN AGE: *The Case For New Leadership*

The ground has shifted and the world has changed considerably in the past year. Quite simply, there is no going back to the way things used to be. Leadership in the Church must be adaptive, innovative, and forward-thinking. Following the highly contentious 2019 special General Conference, annual conference elections of delegates to the next General Conference sent a clear signal that “the people in the pews” want change.

Now is not the time to further delay raising up new leaders who will lead us into the future. Rather, now is precisely the time to hold episcopal elections to infuse new leaders into the Council of Bishops and the worldwide church. We ought to be asking: do we have the leaders that we need to guide us through these turbulent times?

Contrary to common sentiment, Jurisdictional Conferences do not have to occur immediately following the General Conference. The Constitution only stipulates that Jurisdictional Conferences be convened simultaneously (§ 26) and in a manner fixed by the General Conference (§ 46). While it is not possible for the General Conference to convene in 2021 (due to the persisting pandemic and the inability to gather virtually and equitably for a global meeting), there is nothing that constitutionally stands in the way of regular Jurisdictional Conferences from convening virtually in 2021.

REGARDING BOARD LEADERSHIP

There are many denominational commissions and jurisdictional committees that have not been allowed the opportunity to be appropriately filled. Three are particular hindrances to the work of the Church in the midst of a pandemic: the Commission on the General Conference, the General Council on Finance and Administration, and the Jurisdictional Committees on Appeals.

¶511.b of the 2016 Book of Discipline reads: “Approximately half of the Commission shall be elected by the General Conference each quadrennium.” And ¶511.d.2 states that officers for the Commission “shall be elected by the commission at the quadrennial organizational meeting.” Since it is a duty of the Commission to ensure the full participation of all General Conference Delegates (¶511.4.d) should not this ministry and mission of the church be staffed and lead by persons elected in 2019 by annual conferences to the now postponed 2020 General Conference? This is further supported by the Council of Bishops own letter calling for a special session when interpreting the Judicial Council’s canon to conclude that the 2020 delegates are the lawful successors to the postponed 2020 General Conference.

Likewise when discussing GCFA, ¶805.1.a states that “Sixteen voting members of the council shall be elected by the General Conference” and yet, like the Commission on the General Conference, this has not yet occurred. Should not the work of GCFA be supported by the work of the Jurisdictional, Central, and General Conference?

As the Church sorts out restructuring in light of the ongoing conflict over human sexuality, we have an opportunity to stop further harm. Jurisdictional Committees on Appeals (¶27.6), who reflect the values of the 2020 delegations, should be elected at the July Jurisdictional Conferences in order to ensure that LGBTQIA+ clergy retain their orders.

Given that eight of the 12 proposed disciplinary amendments deal with how the church could continue to function if General Conference is unable to meet, it is reasonable to infer that ensuring the appropriate membership of the denomination’s boards, agencies, committees, and commissions are properly staffed is in harmony with the call of this special session of the General Conference. Especially since the boards, agencies and committees of the church are the ones that are called to engage and further the ministry and mission of The United Methodist Church. And even if it were not, it is the right of delegates to bring them forward to the General Conference to be added to the work of the special session for a two-thirds vote.

Jurisdictional committees are also vacant of persons elected from 2020 delegations. This becomes critically important for Jurisdictional Episcopacy Committees as the Council of Bishops meets with Jurisdictional delegations asking them to elect a historic 0 bishops in an attempt to balance the Episcopal Fund. This action is, in itself, an overreach and violation of the spirit of the law (if not the letter) as found in ¶ 27 of The Book of Discipline, as well as Judicial Council Decision 1208, which states: “the General Conference, acting under the authority of the Constitution, provides the legislative process for action on the Episcopal Fund. In doing so, however, the General Conference is constrained by well-established principles. It cannot act in any manner that is contrary to the Constitution. It cannot delegate any of its authority to another body. It cannot delegate any of its legislative powers to its subordinate bodies.”

REGARDING EPISCOPAL LEADERSHIP

With the overdue [retirement of 16 bishops in the United States \(more than one-third of active U.S. bishops\)](#) will significantly impact the diversity of the Council and Colleges. These retirements include four out of the five active Asian-American bishops. This year, the Southeastern Jurisdiction is retiring five bishops, the Northeastern Jurisdiction three (including two Asian Americans and one woman), and the North Central two. The Western Jurisdiction’s representation will decrease by 60% (five to two active bishops). The South Central jurisdiction has a historic opportunity to elect bishops who would make its college more racially diverse. As the Church looks at restructuring, it is more important than ever that there are voices from a wide variety of backgrounds.

In 2024, additional bishops will meet the mandatory retirement age. This will cause radical turnover on the Council and Colleges. For example, the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops would only have one bishop eligible to continue in active status. This will result in prolonged transitional periods and lack of episcopal leadership in the middle of a potential restructuring of the Church. The Church needs to be able to choose the episcopal leadership that it wants for these turbulent times.

Itinerancy is the bedrock of clergy leadership in The United Methodist Church: it intends to create a dynamic movement of talent for the renewal of the connection. Instead of barring elections, what we need now is an intentional infusion of new episcopal leaders. Scripture teaches us about the passing of the mantle from Moses to Joshua, Mordecai to Esther, Elijah to Elisha, and Paul to Timothy. Now is the time to raise up new Episcopal leaders. **Let us exercise the authority granted by ¶ 521.1 and call a special session of Jurisdictional Conferences in late 2021 or early 2022 for the purpose of electing bishops.**

III. GATHERING FACE-TO-FACE AS A SELF-DETERMINING BODY

Despite our ability to adapt and bear extraordinary fruit through technology, virtual gatherings, and digital church, there are some things that can only happen in-person when we gather face-to-face. And the lack of equitable access to the Internet, across 16 time zones, compromises the integrity of any global conference. Therefore, we believe that the significance of church restructuring can only be carefully addressed when we convene physically as the body of Christ. Proposals like the Christmas Covenant and the Protocol, while urgent, cannot be rushed and are better considered through in-person conferencing in 2022. Attempts to take legislative action on these proposals ought to be ignored and voted down.

In the meantime, let us be good stewards of the time we have until the next in-person General Conference. Rather than starting with proposals brokered in 2019 — in a pre-pandemic world — let us begin again. In a world that is being rebuilt after global destabilization due to a death-dealing pandemic, we must also now reimagine The United Methodist Church that we want to be in order to brave this new world.

IV. SACRIFICING MISSION WILL COST US

The Bishops' call to a special General Conference to take "emergency interim actions" is entirely administrative in scope.

Financial and administrative matters must not be our chief or only concern. In the recent conversations about the episcopacy, there has been an emphasis on money that overshadows focus on our mission. Because of the insolvency of the Episcopal Fund, [the Bishops have recommended having no episcopal election until 2024.](#)

The February 13th webinar for U.S. delegates was entirely centered around scarcity. Instead of receiving presentations that inspired us to claim the good news and lean into the missional opportunity available during this period of global transformation, we received bad news that begs the question: Where was the hope? Since 2020 apportionment receipts were much higher than expected — a record \$40 million in January 2021 — what else could happen if we really put our whole hearts to the task?

In order to address the financial challenges, as delegates, we urge the Council of Bishops to volunteer reductions in compensation, for at least three reasons:

- 1 Reconfiguration of the current levels of episcopal compensation will make the Episcopal Fund more solvent in the short-term, as long-term adjustments are implemented.
- 2 Reduction of episcopal compensation could more equitably reset the pay scales throughout the connection.
- 3 A voluntary pay cut by bishops would be a symbolic show of solidarity with the thousands of congregations that have desperately struggled through this pandemic.

Further, we call upon the Council of Bishops to request the General Council on Finance and Administration to model different financial scenarios — other than no episcopal elections — that tend to the monetary concerns. The Bishops' recommendation to elect no new bishops until 2024 is an "all-or-nothing" approach that does not reflect the "middle way" (via media) that is at the heart of Wesleyan Methodism.

VIEW WRITING TEAM & INITIAL SIGNATORIES ON NEXT PAGE

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