



2019 SPECIAL SESSION
OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

Q&A: 2019 Special Session of the General Conference

A GENERAL CONFERENCE 2019 RESOURCE FROM UNITED METHODIST COMMUNICATIONS

THE BASICS

What is General Conference?

Every four years, United Methodists from around the world assemble as the General Conference and connect in worship, prayer, Communion, fellowship – and the legislative work that shapes our shared life. General Conference delegates confer and vote on proposals for resourcing and regulating the life and work of The United Methodist Church. General Conference sets the rules and establishes procedures for virtually every aspect of the church's life. It also communicates the denomination's official position on a variety of issues and cultural challenges. General Conference makes binding decisions related to the connectional and missional life of The United Methodist Church. It is the only body authorized to speak for or as The United Methodist Church.

Who decides to have a special session of General Conference?

The [constitution](#) of The United Methodist Church provides that the [Council of Bishops](#) (all active and retired bishops) may call a special session of General Conference as can the General Conference itself. Any call must state the purpose of the special session. (§114, *The Book of Discipline 2016*).

Why was this special session called?

The [special session in February 2019](#) is to focus on the issue of human sexuality and church unity with the goals of ending distracting and mission-compromising disagreement about how to be in ministry with LGBTQI people. The hope is that decisions made will allow the 2020 General Conference to focus on mission and the next steps for the church's unified global witness.

When and where will the special session of General Conference be held?

The 2019 Special Session of the General Conference will be held Feb. 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri, USA at The Dome, part of the America's Center Convention Complex.

HOW THE SPECIAL SESSION WILL OPERATE

Who will make decisions during the called General Conference?

The delegates. For a special session, the delegates are those elected to the preceding quadrennial General Conference or their successors – unless an annual conference prefers to elect a new slate.

Who are the delegates?

Each United Methodist annual and missionary conference in Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States elects an equal number of clergy and laity to be among the 600 to 1,000 delegates constituting each General Conference. Other delegates come from General Conference-approved concordat or autonomous Methodist churches. For example, the Methodist Church in Great Britain sends four delegates to each General Conference. The special session of General Conference will have 864 delegates, as did the 2016 assembly. Most of the delegates to the special session will have also served in 2016.

A formula determines the [number of delegates from each conference](#). Every conference is guaranteed at least two — one clergy and one lay. In 2016, the largest delegations came from North Katanga (48) and Côte d'Ivoire (34). The largest delegations from conferences in the United States were from Virginia and Western North Carolina (22 each). Most of the conferences in Europe and the Philippines had two delegates, as did nine in the United States.

Around 41.7% of the 2016/2019 delegates come from outside the United States. Thirty percent of 2016 delegates came from Africa and just under 6 percent each from Europe and the Philippines.

What do delegates do?

Delegates pray, worship and fellowship together. They spend most of their time listening, deliberating, discussing and voting on legislation ordering the ministry and connectional life of the global United Methodist Church. This includes considering legislation proposed to revise/reaffirm the rules and polity of The United Methodist Church (published in [The Book of Discipline](#)). Delegates also approve resolutions that become the official positions of the church ([The Book of Resolutions](#)). Delegates also serve in legislative committees and sub-groups, making decisions on the matters before them based on their conscience as moved by the Holy Spirit.

What is the process for making decisions and how is voting done at General Conference?

Delegates will vote on motions and amendments on petitions included in three plans in the [Commission on a Way Forward report](#) and other petitions from individuals and groups of United Methodists. Fifty-one petitions, besides those included in the Commission's report, were submitted by the deadline. The [rules approved for the 2016 General Conference](#) (found in the *2016 Daily Christian Advocate Handbook for Delegates*, p. 16) will guide the initial conference deliberations. They may be amended or suspended. Delegates will use electronic, smartcard-enabled devices to cast their secret ballots and to request recognition to address the assembly.

Will all business be handled in plenary sessions?

Quadrennial sessions of General Conference have multiple committees to review and make recommendations on petitions, making the number that come before the full General Conference manageable. For the special session, the Commission on the General Conference adopted the recommendation of its Rules Committee that there be [one legislative committee](#). This will allow all delegates to be part of both legislative committee and plenary session deliberations. Following Roberts Rules of Order, a legislative committee votes to accept, reject or revise the various petitions. In all deliberations, a simple majority passes most motions. Constitutional changes require a two-thirds

majority (and approval by two-thirds of those voting at annual conferences). A one-fifth vote sends legislation to the Judicial Council for review and ruling.

How do other United Methodists communicate with the delegates to General Conference?

Contact your pastor, district superintendent or annual conference office for a list of your conference's delegates to the special session of General Conference. A number of annual conference websites include the names of the delegates. You will also find a [list of delegates and reserves](#) in the 2016 Daily Christian Advocate delegate handbook. The listing by annual conferences begins on page 15.

Many bishops and annual conferences are conducting informational and listening sessions for church members to hear about the plans, express their thoughts and pray for the delegates.

THE BUSINESS OF THE SPECIAL SESSION

What can be considered?

Business considered during a special session is limited to the purpose stated in the call unless the delegates by a two-thirds majority vote to address other matters. The call from the Council of Bishops says, *"The purpose of the 2019 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."* General Conference 2016 approved creation of the commission by the council and charged it with examining all paragraphs in *The Book of Discipline* concerning human sexuality and exploring options to strengthen the unity and mission of the global church.

Are the three recommendations from the Commission on a Way Forward the only options available to the called General Conference?

No. Delegates may also consider other petitions deemed by the Committee on Reference to be in harmony with the bishops' call. The delegates can also amend the petitions submitted by the Commission.

Will a decision be made at GC 2019? If not, how does The United Methodist Church justify the cost?

General Conference 2019 will make decisions on the petitions submitted by [the Commission on a Way Forward](#) and [other individuals](#) and [groups](#). A simple majority is required to pass most legislation. Constitutional amendments require approval by two-thirds of the delegates and by two-thirds of those voting in annual conference sessions.

Did anything need to happen at the 2018 annual conferences to prepare for the 2019 and 2020 General Conferences?

No official action was required unless an annual conference chose to elect new delegates. Conferences will elect new delegations to the 2020 assembly. Most will do that in 2019. Many annual conferences did provide [learning/feedback opportunities](#) during their yearly meetings.

THE ROLE OF BISHOPS DURING GENERAL CONFERENCE

What do bishops do at General Conference?

Bishops attend but have neither voice nor vote in the General Conference plenaries or legislative committees. They pray and preach; they convene and preside over plenary sessions and open legislative committees. In the quadrennial sessions, one bishop shares an opening address (along with laity, clergy and youth). They may address a legislative session only with the permission of the General Conference.

What is the Council of Bishops' role with the Commission on a Way Forward and General Conference? Why do we keep hearing about episcopal recommendations when they have no vote at General Conference?

Bishops in The United Methodist Church “are authorized to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church. The role and calling forth of the bishop is to exercise oversight and support of the Church in its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (*Book of Discipline* ¶401).

Delegates to General Conference 2016 empowered the Council of Bishops to provide [prayerful leadership](#) and explore options for “a way forward” from the church’s theological impasse over human sexuality. In response, the bishops created the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) to offer possible solutions. [The Council in July 2016 defined the mission, vision, and scope of the Commission](#) and **selected 32 people** (one-third laity, one-third clergy, one-third bishops) from nine different countries to reflect the broad theological, racial, sexual, cultural, contextual and age diversity of the global church. The COB also chose three moderators to guide the commission’s work. In February 2017, the Council called the **special session of General Conference** for Feb. 23-26, 2019 to receive the Commission’s report and to make decisions about the church’s future ministry with LGBTQ individuals and church unity. The Commission reported to the Council on its work several times before delivering a final report in May 2018. After prayerfully reviewing the plans included in the report, a significant majority of the bishops expressed support for the One Church Plan. A small group of bishops developed an expanded Traditional Plan, which became part of the Commission’s final report. The Commission released its final report in the official languages of the church in July 2018.

At General Conference, bishops will provide spiritual leadership and preside over plenary sessions.

Which of the proposed plans has the support of the Council of Bishops?

[A significant majority of the members of the Council of Bishops and the Commission on a Way Forward recommend the One Church Plan for adoption.](#) All three plans in the Commission on a Way Forward report will be presented to General Conference as will several others being submitted through petitions. Any plan delegates approve will likely include amendments and modifications based on other submitted petitions and conference deliberation. Most legislation can be passed by a simple majority. Any petition to change the church’s constitution must be approved by a two-thirds majority both of General Conference delegates and of lay and clergy voting in annual conference sessions. The delegates may request the Judicial Council to rule on the constitutionality of any approved plan. [The Judicial Council will rule on the constitutionality of the plans included in the Commission’s report during its fall meeting beginning on Oct. 23.](#)

KEEPING INFORMED ABOUT THE SPECIAL SESSION

Will there be an Advance DCA? What will it include?

Yes. The Daily Christian Advocate (DCA) is the official journal of General Conference. The [Advance edition](#) will include proposed legislation from the Commission on a Way Forward report and other petitions. Among the other information included will be the schedule, lists of all delegates and members of the Council of Bishops, Connectional Table, Judicial Council, Commission on the General Conference and hospitality team, registration information, maps, seating assignments, guidelines for conferencing and Rules of Order. The Advance DCA is sent to all delegates, bishops and committees related to General Conference. It will also be posted online. Print copies will be available.

How can I follow the General Conference?

The General Conference special session will be live-streamed at UMC.org/gc2019. Copies of the daily editions of the Daily Christian Advocate will also be available in .pdf format for free download at UMC.org/gc2019. United Methodist News Service, UMNews.org, will provide full coverage of the event. United Methodist Communications new leader communications team will also provide coverage through [@ResourceUMC](https://twitter.com/ResourceUMC) on Twitter and other social media channels. Prior to and after the session, a wealth of information and resources is being posted at www.umc.org/gc2019 and www.umcom.org/gc2019-resources.

BEYOND THE SPECIAL SESSION

What will be some of the repercussions of decisions made at the special session for jurisdictions, annual conferences and local churches?

This will depend on what legislation General Conference approves. The report of the Commission on a Way Forward contains three plans – The One Church Plan, The Connectional Conference Plan and The Traditional Plan. It details the effects of each plans, if adopted as proposed, for local churches, clergy, annual conferences, the Council of Bishops, general agencies, United Methodist-related institutions, the mission field and the global church. The report also outlines changes to *The Book of Discipline*, financial considerations and whether constitutional amendments would be required. For details, refer to the [report of the Commission on a Way Forward](#), [a side-by-side comparison of the plans](#) or summaries of the Commission’s work.

Are any “gracious exit” plans available to churches that may find the decisions of General Conference unacceptable?

The Book of Discipline outlines the process for congregations in severe disagreement with church law to leave the denomination. [Property is held in trust](#) (BOD ¶¶2501-2505) with legal ramifications and negotiations with the annual conference governed by church law. Individual members may disassociate from The United Methodist Church by joining another denomination/church. The One Church Plan and Connectional Conference Plan do not include processes for congregations to leave the denomination. The Traditional Plan provides what it calls a “gracious exit” by requiring local churches to leave and form other denominations if they cannot support and uphold expanded restrictive language on human sexuality. They would keep their property and liabilities but still pay any unfunded pastor pension liabilities.

How might this General Conference change the structure of the global church?

The structure of the church could change in several ways. Those possibilities listed here are as outlined in the COWF report to General Conference and are subject to change by the General Conference.

- The **One Church Plan** (OCP) makes no significant change to church structure.
- The **Connectional Conference Plan** (CCP) would create three values-based connectional conferences disconnected from geography. Jurisdictional conferences and annual conferences in the United States would vote to join one of the new conferences. Central conferences could join one of the new conferences or form another connectional conference. **Bishops** and **clergy** would associate with at least one connectional conference. Several constitutional amendments would be required to implement this plan.
- The **Traditional Plan** divides churches and conferences, bishops and clergy, based on certification processes for accountability to the *Discipline*. It provides a path for non-complying conferences and churches to leave and form (possibly) affiliated Wesleyan denominations.

Will there also be a General Conference in 2020? Why?

Yes. Barring special circumstances, the General Conference will assemble May 5-15, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. It will take up the quadrennial business of the church. It may also handle matters arising from decisions of the 2019 special session.

Are decisions of the special called session binding on the 2020 General Conference?

As can any quadrennial assembly, the 2020 General Conference can revisit matters addressed by earlier sessions as well as consider new petitions. Legislation adopted in 2019 may include timelines and processes that would delay implementation until the 2020 General Conference (for example, constitutional changes). No General Conference can bind or limit the decision-making authority of a future assembly.

PAYING FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION

How much will the special called session cost? How is it being paid for?

[The special session is budgeted to cost just under \\$3.7 million.](#) The General Council on Finance and Administration will provide \$3 million from church giving to the General Administration Fund. Gifts, including a grant of \$450,000 from United Methodist Communications, will offset the remaining costs. Delegates will not pay fees. Visitors will be asked to pay a nominal fee when receiving credentials to enter the meeting space.

Why is money being spent to call a session one year before a regular session?

General Conference 2019 was mandated and called for as an action of General Conference 2016 when the delegates on May 18, 2016, accepted the [Council of Bishops' offering for a way forward](#). This special session is to focus on the issue of human sexuality and church unity with the goals of ending distracting and mission-compromising disagreement about how to be in ministry with LGBTQ people. The hope is that decisions made will allow the 2020 General Conference to focus on mission and the next steps for the church's unified global witness.

Can I volunteer?

More than the 150 or so volunteers will serve as pages and marshals at the event. United Methodists from Missouri and Illinois Great Rivers conferences will provide help and hospitality for the delegates and other General Conference attendees. Applications to volunteer to serve as a page or marshal at the 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis will be available in mid-2019.

— Compiled by **David C. Teel**, a Christian educator and freelance writer based in Nashville, Tennessee, and the former academic books editor for Abingdon Press. The questions were based on a survey of local church leaders asking them to identify topics related to General Conference 2019 on which it would be helpful to have information.

To learn more about the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, check out these resources:

- [“Gathered for Mission, Structured to Serve: A General Conference Primer”](#)
- Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* Abingdon Press, 2006.
- Lacey C. Warner, *The Method of Our Mission: United Methodist Polity and Organization*, Abingdon Press, 2014.
- [Glossary](#), www.umc.org.

Find other resources related to General Conference 2019 and the Commission on the Way Forward at www.umcom.org/gc2019 and www.umc.org/gc2019.