



Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church



Bishops uphold values of mission, unity, space, contextuality in interim report on Way Forward's work

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LAKE JUNALUSKA, NORTH CAROLINA _ Placing emphasis on the values of unity, space and contextuality - all for the sake of mission - the Council of Bishops (COB) is exploring sketches of three models as possible directions for a way forward for The United Methodist Church over LGBTQ inclusion.

With the mission of God through the risen Christ at the core, the bishops this week received an interim report from the Commission on a Way Forward that offered three sketches of models that would help ease the impasse in the church, noting that the power of the Holy Spirit trumps and guides all the church's activities. The Commission serves the COB, helping prepare the COB to fulfill its mandate to make a recommendation for a way forward to the General Conference.

Just as the Commission did not express a preference for any of the models in its interim report to the COB in order for the bishops to fully do their work, the COB is also not now expressing a preference for any model, while engaging deeply with them and the implications for their church and their leadership. This will provide the space bishops need to teach and engage leaders in their episcopal areas.

After receiving the interim report of the sketches of the three possible models, the bishops engaged in prayerful discerning and offered substantial feedback to the Commission, but did not take any vote on any of the sketches.

The moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward noted that the values highlighted in any one model also live within the fabric of the other models. Values expressed by any one model are not exclusive to one or absent in another. The values that may be associated with the identity of any one model are there because it may be a value lifted to a higher level of preference or differentiation among the models.

"Operate with a heart of peace and an openness. All three models grew out of mission, vision and scope. Each one of these models connects to a story and experience that is represented in this body," Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball, one of the moderators told her fellow bishops.

She added: "As we talk about it, let's be respectful of each model. When we speak about one of the models in a less than respectful way, we are speaking of someone's experience or someone's conscience. How we talk about these models is important because they are representative of where people are standing and how people are experiencing the church."

The Commission and the COB acknowledge the interaction between the values of unity, space and contextuality, and the tension this interaction often creates, as part of what completes the UMC as a denomination rather than what divides it.

The Commission shared sketches of three models, with the awareness that the Commission and the COB are not restricted to these sketches and are open to learning, listening and improvement. It is likely that additional models or sketches may emerge as this process continues. Here is the summary about the sketches of the models presented to the bishops:

- **One sketch of a model affirms the current *Book of Discipline* language and places a high value on accountability.**
- **Another sketch of a model removes restrictive language and places a high value on contextualization. This sketch also specifically protects the rights of those whose conscience will not allow them to perform same gender weddings or ordain LGBTQ persons.**
- **A third sketch of a model is grounded in a unified core that includes shared doctrine and services and one COB, while also creating different branches that have clearly defined values such as accountability, contextualization and justice.**
- **Each sketch represents values that are within the COB and across the church.**
- **Each sketch includes gracious way of exit for those who feel called to exit from the denomination.**

The values underlying these proposed models are found in two documents; **The Mission, Vision and Scope** document, which was affirmed by the COB; and the **Status Report of the Commission**, released in July 2017. As part of the ongoing discernment within the church, resident bishops are being equipped to lead discussions in their episcopal areas by emphasizing the values of the proposed models as found in these two important documents.

The Commission will process the feedback received from the bishops at the Lake Junaluska meeting and will continue to welcome further input from members of the church through conversations and discussions with their respective bishops on the strengths and limitations of each model. The basic resources for these conversations were shared in a handbook with the bishops, and this handbook will be available on the Commission on a Way Forward's website as a PDF.

The COB and the Commission have a series of meetings scheduled for early 2018 designed to continue the preparations for the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019. This includes Commission meetings in January and March; an additional COB meeting in February before a final report is discussed at the May meeting of the COB.

The COB is committed to prayerfully seeking God's future for the UMC and continues to invite the entire church to be engaged in praying for a way forward.

"Pray for the work of the Commission and for the bishops as they continue to discern God's plan for the future of the UMC; a future that shows love for all of God's people and a future with hope," said COB President Bishop Bruce R. Ough.