
CHURCH COUNCIL MEETING | SUNDAY, MAY 19, 5PM | REV. DANE WOMACK
UPDATE ON UMC & GENERAL CONFERENCE

Vocabulary

- A. **Book of Discipline (BOD):** Fundamental book outlining the law, doctrine, administration, organizational work and procedures of The United Methodist Church. Each General Conference amends The Book of Discipline, and the actions of the General Conference are reflected in the quadrennial revision.
- B. **General Conference:** The highest legislative body in The United Methodist Church. The voting membership consists of an equal number of clergy and lay delegates elected by the annual conferences. Convenes every four years. Only body that can speak officially for the denomination.
- C. **Annual Conference:** A regional, organizational unit of The United Methodist Church and the yearly business meeting of that unit, both presided over by a bishop. The business session is composed of equal numbers of clergy and laity. At least one layperson from each pastoral charge is a member.
- D. **Jurisdictions:** Five U.S. jurisdictions: North Central, Northeastern, South Central, Southeastern and Western. Jurisdictional Conferences convene every four years. The business includes the election and assignment of bishops.
- E. **Central Conference:** One of seven geographic areas outside the territorial United States, each composed of annual conferences as determined by the General Conference. Central Conferences have responsibilities similar to those of Jurisdictional Conferences. The seven central conferences are in Europe, Africa and the Philippines.

Common terms with respect to sexuality dialogue

- A. **Traditionalists:** Those who believe marriage should only be shared between one man and one woman. Strict Traditionalists cannot be in a church with those who believe/practice differently.
- B. **Centrist:** Those who are sympathetic to both Traditionalists & Progressives and do not have a strong opinion on gay marriage. Centrists are often more concerned with maintaining community and unity over and above a single ethic on marriage. They do not mind being in a church with people who disagree with them.
- C. **Progressives:** Those who believe the church should be actively working to recognize/celebrate gay marriage within the church. Strict Progressives cannot be in a church with those who believe/practice differently.
- D. **Incompatibilists:** Traditionalists and/or Progressives who can only be in a church/denomination with 100% agreement.
- E. **Compatibilists:** Traditionalists/Centrist/Progressives who are willing to be in a church/denomination which includes diverse opinions & practices.

Recent History & Landscape

- A. **1972 General Conference:** The first statement regarding homosexuality was published in *The Book of Discipline*
- B. **2016 General Conference:** Legislation enacted assigning the Council of Bishops the responsibility to find a solution for our denomination that has been deeply divided on matters of human sexuality.
- C. **2016: The Commission on the Way Forward Appointed:** Diverse group created by Council of Bishops to assist it in leading the denomination. It offered three options: The One Church Plan, The Connectional Conference Plan and The Traditional Plan. The Council endorsed the One Church Plan.
- D. **2019 Called Session of General Conference:** The "Traditional Plan" was enacted by a 53% - 47% margin. Adopted ¶2553 as a process for disaffiliation presumably for more progressive churches who could not remain UMC for reasons of conscience.
- E. **January 2020: "The Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation" Unveiled** This plan proposed allowing churches desiring to do so to separate in an easy and orderly manner. Support for the Protocol was offered from across the theological spectrum and many thought the 2020 General Conference would enact it. However, General Conference 2020 was postponed due to C19.
- F. **February 2022:** The rescheduled 2020 General Conference was to begin August 29, 2022 but was canceled (primarily due to travel & visa issues) and the Global Methodist Church announced it would form on May 1, 2022.

Disaffiliations (¶2553)

- A. ¶2553 was intended for more progressive churches, but Judicial Council decisions broadened the application so it was available to any church.
- B. 2022-23 UMC churches used ¶2553 (adopted at 2019 Special General Conference) to Disaffiliate
- C. ¶2553 was only available to U.S. churches & sunset (closed) Dec. 31, 2023.
- D. Denomination-wide, Disaffiliations represents ~25% (7,631 churches, 24% membership).
- E. Arkansas Conference Disaffiliations: 162 churches, ~27%. 75% of which are small, rural churches.
- F. Disaffiliation season was painful. Particularly challenging in churches of any size.
- G. Many churches that disaffiliated have long been wanting out of the UMC.

2024 General Conference

- A. April 23 - May 4, 2024 in Charlotte, NC | technically the postponed 2020 General Conference
- B. ~700 delegates. ½ clergy & ½ laity
- C. Legislation submitted by individuals, churches, or ACs. 1100 petitions submitted for 2024. Petitions go to a legislative committee then (potentially) recommended to plenary. Simple majority approves most petitions. Constitutional (¶1-61) amendments require 2/3 majority. Then must be ratified by 2/3 at Annual Conferences.

Celebrations

- A. Full Communion with the Episcopal Church. TEC will *potentially* vote to approve at its next convention.
- B. UMCOR continues to be a highlight and strength of the denomination.
- C. Higher Education including Africa University.
- D. Ecumenical worship where the UMC recognized its pan-Methodist brothers and sisters
- E. First Native American Bishop to Preside at General Conference, Bishop David Wilson (Great Plains)
- F. First Black Female President of the Council of Bishops, Bishop Tracy Malone (East Ohio)
- G. Book of Resolutions updated to include concerns such as climate change, care for immigrants, etc.

Regionalization

- A. "Regionalization" was a proposal from GC Committee on Central Conference Matters and is an effort to move *away* from US-centric to a more global structure. The UMC began as an American denomination, meaning that much structure and many decisions are US-centric. GC often focuses US churches.
- B. Currently, the US has 5 geographic jurisdictions. Outside US are "Central Conferences" (Europe—3, Philippines—1, Africa—3).
- C. 8 petitions around Regionalization passed. Will need to be ratified by 2/3 of all voting delegates to all Annual Conferences, so it will take some time going into effect.
- D. Regionalization will create Regional Conferences defined as geographical areas such as "The United States" and "The Philippines". Each will have the power and flexibility to make best choices around mission & ministry in their context.

Bishop Formulas & Allocations Updated

- A. e.g. ARUMC Bishop Merrill is *expected to *also** become the Bishop of the Oklahoma and Oklahoma Indian Missionary conferences when current Bishop Jimmy Nunn retires Aug. 31. Will not be official until Jurisdictional Conference in July.

Deacons Granted Sacramental Authority

- A. Deacons can now celebrate Communion & Baptisms where appointed to serve (church, outreach, mission, etc.).

Budget & Finances

- A. New General Church Budget ~\$373.4m assumes 90% apportionment collection. 40% reduction from previous budget.
- B. Conference Apportionment Formula updated/reduced. Currently: 3.29%; '25-'26: 2.6%; '27-'28: 2.9%
- C. General Conference adopted a new clergy retirement plan ("Compass") to ensure greater financial sustainability by doing away with longtime pension plan. The new retirement plan is designed to provide lifetime income, and ensure adequate retirement income for lower-paid Clergy. (<https://www.wespath.org/assets/1/7/5447.pdf>)

Human Sexuality & Weddings

- A. General Conference voted to update the UMC Book of Discipline by shifting decision-making regarding sexual orientation and marriage to the local church and/or Annual Conference. Changes around Discipline paragraphs related to sexuality were

primarily handled through Consent Calendar votes. Meaning there were few major debates on the plenary floor. The outcomes are not shocking, but the efficiency made this General Conference different and somewhat surprising.

- B. Clergy:
 - a. Prohibitions on openly gay clergy were removed.
 - b. Conference Boards of Ordained Ministry and/or District Committees On Ministry will investigate candidates for ministry as they always have. Sexuality will no longer be a qualifier.
 - c. Bishops & Cabinets will carefully appoint gay clergy where appropriate.
 - d. No church is compelled to receive a gay minister.
- C. Weddings:
 - a. Discipline around clergy performing same-sex unions/weddings was removed.
 - b. Related changes were also made to the UMC Social Principles.
 - c. Included was legislation protecting pastors who choose not to do same-sex weddings so they cannot be punished.
 - d. There are no mandates or requirements around weddings for clergy or churches.
 - i. Pastors can celebrate weddings as they so choose according to their conscience.
 - ii. Congregations may develop wedding policies for their church as needed. (This conversation would begin with the Trustees. See Judicial Council Decision 1503 and ARUMC Bishop Merrill's notes below.)
- D. The Discipline has returned to its pre-1972 version and in a sense is "neutral" on matters of gay clergy and gay weddings.

ARUMC Bishop Laura Merrill's statement from postponed 2020 General Conference

The General Conference has taken many actions this week that have strengthened the ability of the local church to minister to the people and families in their contexts, across the world, and across Arkansas. I want to speak with you today specifically about the General Conference decision to lift prohibitions on the participation of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church, including our conducting same-sex weddings.

Voices from outside the UMC are already trying to convince our people and churches that they will be forced to act in ways that are not aligned with who they are as a result of these decisions.

But the fact is that in your local setting, your leadership and members will still chart the course of your ministry, just as is currently the case.

Let me be clear: the recent decisions of the General Conference do not require action from anyone. While the removal of these restrictions comes as a joyous gift to some of our people and their families and congregations, others may not experience much difference at all. Still, others may be worried about what's next. Again, no one has to do anything in response. As the newly adopted language reads, we will "not penalize any clergy for performing, or refraining from performing, a same-sex marriage service." Nor will we "require any local church to hold or prohibit a local church from holding a same-sex marriage service on property owned by a local church."

This is a good time, however, for conversation. We are entering a new chapter as a church, and we must proceed with care for each other, to guard the health of our body and its members.

To that end, your conference leaders and I have developed a conversation guide for your use, particularly regarding same-sex weddings. These are based on the importance of our good communication and transparency in our relationships with each other and our decision-making at the local level. You can find that conversation guide on our conference website.

As I travel across Arkansas, one of the things our people are most proud of and committed to is the open table, the table of Jesus Christ. All who seek to know Christ are welcome in the United Methodist Church, and the relationships God has given you in your churches are a holy gift. I therefore hope you will move slowly and prayerfully together.

In closing, I encourage you to remember Philippians 4: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.



Conversation Guide Regarding Same-Sex Weddings Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church¹ May 1, 2024

The 2020 Postponed General Conference approved the allowing of same-sex weddings, with the removal of prohibitive language becoming effective upon the close of General Conference on May 4, 2024. The actions of the General Conference this week have strengthened the ability of the local church to minister to the people and families in their contexts, across the world, and across Arkansas. The 2020 Postponed General Conference voted to lift the restriction on same-sex weddings, a decision that became effective upon the close of the conference session. This action has strengthened the ability of our churches to minister to people and families in their own particular contexts, both around the world and right here in Arkansas.

Voices from outside the UMC are trying to convince people and churches that they will be forced to act in ways that are not aligned with who they are as a result of these decisions. But the fact is that in your local church, your leadership and members will still chart the course of your ministry, just as they have always done.

We offer these guidelines as a resource, not to sway or hasten any decisions you feel are before you, but simply to equip you to hold meaningful conversations.

Congregations | Before a same-sex wedding occurs within an Arkansas United Methodist congregation, the following steps are recommended to help church leaders and the larger congregation navigate these potential changes with care and Christ-centered love:

1. The church council, staff/pastor-parish relations committee (S/PPRC), and pastor(s) should prayerfully discern how or whether this option to celebrate same-sex weddings in the church fits into the congregation's ministry and whether the pastor desires to perform same-sex weddings or wishes to abstain for reasons of conscience. *(Note: congregations and clergy should not be concerned about potential civil legal action or punitive church action should they decide not to conduct same-sex weddings. These decisions are the responsibility of the local church and pastor, protected by the First Amendment and by the Book of Discipline.)*
2. If the church council desires to move forward with a policy clarification or revision, the council should provide opportunities to receive congregational feedback and share how this decision is part of the congregation's ministry in its context. Open and transparent communication is essential!
3. As the governing board, the church council has always been and will remain responsible for setting the congregation's wedding policy. For instance, some congregations only allow weddings for members and their immediate families, while other congregations utilize their sanctuary as a community venue for weddings. Similarly, some congregations require that only the appointed clergy may preside, while others allow guest clergy. This option to allow same-sex weddings is no different. Within the bounds of the Book of Discipline, the church council continues to be empowered to set policies for weddings in their church facilities.
4. During this season, in the same spirit of transparency, it would be helpful to let your district superintendent know of significant conversations or decisions at your church.

Pastors | Before a same-sex wedding is conducted by an Arkansas United Methodist clergyperson, the following steps are recommended in order to ensure that the sacred relationship between the pastor and congregation is encouraged and supported:

1. As always, pastors will decide which couples are ready for marriage. Pastors have always had the right of conscience to decline to perform any wedding ceremony, and this fact has not changed.
2. The church council, staff/pastor-parish relations committee (S/PPRC), and pastor should prayerfully discern whether or how this option to celebrate same-sex weddings in the church fits into the congregation's ministry and whether the pastor desires to perform same-sex weddings or wishes to abstain for reasons of conscience. *(Note: congregations and clergy should not be concerned about potential civil legal action or punitive church action should it decide not to conduct same-sex weddings. These decisions are the responsibility of the local church and pastor, protected by the First Amendment and by the Book of Discipline.)*
3. The church council, S/PPRC, and senior pastor should similarly discuss not only if the wedding policy of the church should be revised to allow same-sex weddings but also how the pastor will respond to invitations to perform same-sex weddings at off-site venues. This time of discussion is necessary because the pastor is both an ordained or licensed member of the conference and the spiritual leader of the congregation. The overall ministry of the pastor, the context of the local community, and the spiritual needs of the congregation are all impacted by the pastor's ministry and actions. Open and transparent communication between the pastor, church leaders, and all church members is essential!
4. If the clergyperson is not the senior pastor (i.e., an appointed associate pastor or deacon or a retired pastor whose charge conference is located at the church), then the clergyperson should first seek counsel with the appointed senior pastor.
5. During this season, in the same spirit of transparency, it would be helpful to let your district superintendent know of significant conversations or decisions at your church.

¹https://arumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conversation-Guide-Regarding-Same-Sex-Weddings_-Arkansas-Conference-of-the-United-Methodist-Church.pdf

Rev. Dane's Reflections

- A. FUMC Paragould has not allowed itself to be defined by one theological/political identity and is not associated with the most progressive or most conservative branches of the UMC. FUMC stands within the broad center ("moderate") of the UMC, the ARUMC, and alongside many FUMCs.
- B. Mid-20th-century brought a renewed interest in Ecumenism and Unity. Late-20th & early-21st-century is reversing course.
- C. Local churches (including non-denominational) are growing toward greater autonomy.
- D. Denominations/Institutions do not have the same power or attraction they once did.
- E. UMC is moving toward a more diverse, more loosely-connected, smaller denomination with less overhead and less top-down authority.
 - a. More autonomy globally via Regionalization. Long-term project.
 - b. More diversity nationally/locally through thinner Discipline.
 - c. 25% loss due to disaffiliation, X% loss due to C19, 42% reduction general church budget.
 - d. One hope is that the institutional anxiety/inefficiency around the last few years in the UMC/GC is behind us.
 - e. Local churches with a strong sense of identity, mission, and ministry will continue to flourish.
 - f. Pastoral appointments have grown and will continue to grow more complicated.
- F. For UMC, there is difference between Doctrine (§104: Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, General Rules, Wesley's Notes on the NT, Wesley's Standard Sermons) & Social Principles (§160-166).
 - a. Our Doctrine has not and will not change. Accusations that the UMC is not or will not be "orthodox" (belief in Trinity, Virgin Birth, Resurrection, Divinity of Christ, etc.) are untrue & hurtful. UMC clergy and leaders are as committed to theological orthodoxy as ever.
 - b. Social Principles have and will continue to be adapted to a changing world.
 - c. No one agrees 100% with the UMC Discipline including the Social Principles.
- G. Marriage is not a sacrament. Policies & practices have changed before (divorce, interracial marriage).
- H. Few (if any) issues in the church are as simple as "The Bible says..."
- I. What's next for FUMC Paragould? The Bishop's guidance for churches & pastors is a good place to start. Should Rev. Dane offer a class on Biblical Understandings of Sexuality and Marriage?

Rev. Dane's personal Commitments & Goals

- A. As someone raised in the UMC who is now an ordained elder, I continue to be surprised, encouraged, and sometimes confused by the fact God has brought such a diverse and interesting group of people together.
- B. I am deeply committed to unity around our shared worship of Jesus Christ. In a world of partisanism, tribalism, and division, I am enthusiastic about the counter-cultural work of building bridges and growing unity
- C. **Jesus' Prayer for unity in John 17:** *I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*
- D. **Unity:** "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity," is an aphorism variously attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), John Wesley (1703 – 1791), and to a number of theologians in between them. Some describe a "hermeneutic" of generosity and charity towards others.
- E. **Catholic Spirit:** In one of his most famous sermons, "Catholic Spirit," John Wesley wrote, "Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may."
- F. **Wesleyan/Methodist General Rules:** (1) Do no harm; (2) Do good; (3) Attend upon the ordinances of God.
- G. **Epistemic Humility:** In an essay on Wesley and the natural sciences, professor and scholar Randy Maddox says, "*Wesley's mature 'epistemic humility' was out of step with the push of the Enlightenment for certainty, and particularly with the emerging modern approach to science. But it resonates with a two-sided call for epistemic humility in the current science and religion dialogue.*"²

² "John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences" by Randy L. Maddox, Wesleyan Theological Journal 44.1 (Spring 2009) 23-54, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37749077.pdf>