

Human Sexuality and the Unity of the Church: An Introduction to the Work of the Commission on a Way Forward

A General Conference 2019 Resource from United Methodist Communications

Update: In early July, the Council of Bishops asked the Judicial Council, the top court in The United Methodist Church, [to rule on the constitutionality of the three plans](#) included in the report of the Commission on the Way Forward. In [Decision 1366](#) on Oct. 25, the Judicial Council unanimously found the One Church Plan to be largely constitutional and found some problems in the Traditional Plan petitions that would need to be addressed before that plan could pass a constitutional test. Since the Connectional Conference Plan contains proposed constitutional changes required for implementation, the court ruled it has no authority to scrutinize the plan at this time. [Read the full UMNS report on the Judicial Council's rulings.](#)

(#) indicates a page number in the report of the [Commission on a Way Forward](#)

Increasing harm to one another arising from a deepening impasse related to human sexuality provides the broad context for the formation and work of the [Commission on a Way Forward](#). Many agree that conflict among people of good will about ministry by, with and to LGBTQI individuals – specifically ordination and marriage – threatens the effectiveness of the witness and mission of The United Methodist Church.

General Conference 2016 empowered the Council of Bishops (COB) to provide prayerful leadership and explore options for “a way forward” from the impasse. In response, the bishops created the **Commission on a Way Forward** (COWF) and subsequently called [a special session of General Conference for Feb. 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri, USA](#). The delegates will receive the Commission’s report, consider petitions and determine the next steps for church structure, discipline and practices related to human sexuality.

In July 2016, the bishops defined [the mission, vision and scope of the commission’s work](#). Its charge included examining every paragraph in *The Book of Discipline* concerning human sexuality and possibly recommending revisions and making recommendations for new relationships to strengthen church unity. The bishops named **32 people** to the COWF. One-third laity, one-third clergy and one-third bishops from nine different countries, they reflect the broad theological, racial, sexual, cultural, contextual and age diversity of the global church. The Council also named three bishops to serve as co-moderators to guide the COWF’s work.

In its report to General Conference and the church at large, the commission notes that its purpose “was never to arrive at uniformity of thought among its own members or to design the shape the church should take in the future. The purpose has been to help the Council of Bishops and the General Conference to do this work of decision-making... While not (fully) agreeing with everything in this report the Commission members always had agreement to keep the work moving ahead for the benefit of the whole church. (They) have been in **covenant** with each other, and remain hopeful about God’s continuing work through The United Methodist Church.”

The COWF gathered as individuals **committed to the COB's vision** for exploring future ways of being church that **maximize United Methodist witness and mission**. Agreeing that the church's unity is always in "shared affirmation of the Triune God," the COWF recognized with the bishops a current environment of "skepticism and distrust" and chose to engage one another with honesty about their differences.

They agreed to:

- work to design solutions emphasizing unity while considering the challenges presented by diverse experiences;
- balance the desire for a unified witness with respect for contextual and cultural differences across the global church;
- take seriously the divergent interpretations of scripture characterizing the United Methodist connection
- be open to living our unity through "new forms and structures" and possible revisions to *The Book of Discipline*.

In nine meetings over 17 months, the COWF did its "conferencing" work shaped by **key foundational ideas** and shared **theological and missional frameworks**. [The Committee on Faith and Order](#), a Wesleyan missiologist and the ongoing collaboration and feedback of the COB assisted them.

Key foundational ideas (2-3) include:

- **Common Core** rooted in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds; Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith and General Rules; Wesleyan hymns; practices facilitating personal and social holiness; prayer, worship and the sacraments; accountability groups; church polity; and from the document "Wonder, Love, and Praise" – the conviction that God's saving love is for all people, creating community and transforming lives;
- A need for **space and separation** where irreconcilable differences create harm;
- Consideration of the "present missional situation" and whether it calls for greater **centralization or de-centralization**;
- **Three Values Perspectives: Traditionalist** (a one-man/ one-woman view of marriage and sexual activity and greater accountability at all levels of the church); **Contextual** (translating and adapting the gospel into varying missional settings); and **Progressive** (full inclusion of all people, including the LGBTQI community, in the life of the church at all levels and celebration of same-gender marriages);
- **Learning to be a global church** understanding how faith and culture shape conversations around LGBTQI identity and practice;
- **Defining our unity** in Jesus Christ and recognizing that when we cannot live in unity with one another our witness is compromised;
- **Maximizing our public mission** "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" over private mission(s) to please constituencies already in the church;

- **Ways of being with each other** with a “heart of peace” (seeing others as created in the image of God with gifts) vs. a “heart of war” (seeing others as vehicles or obstacles to winning);
- **Praying our way forward** daily, for one another, the church and in all commission processes and council meetings; asking United Methodists across the world to pray each day from 2:23-2:26, numbers that correspond to the dates of Feb. 23-26.

The “**Theological Framework**” (7) developed by members of COWF and the Committee on Faith and Order includes:

- **Ecumenical consensus** (Acts 2; John 3; Genesis 1, 3)
- **Grace and Holiness** (Romans 5, Mark 12)
- **Connection and Mission** (Philippians 2, Matthew 28)
- **A Convicted Humility** [1 Corinthians 12-14]

COWF members affirmed that United Methodists are part of the great ecumenical consensus expressed in the historic creeds. They share with Christians of many communions the centrality of scripture in shaping and maintaining church doctrine and practice. They stressed distinctively Wesleyan convictions about grace and holiness, connection and mission. They embraced a posture of “convicted humility,” which reflects an honest and humble acknowledgement of differences, the need for correction and active repentance for harm caused from seeking one’s own way rather than the “shape of faithfulness together”.

Drafted in consultation with a Wesleyan missiologist, the “**Missional Framework**” focuses on the church’s unifying mission to make disciples who share in God’s saving work of restoration and reconciliation. This unifying calling on all Christians requires faithfulness, humility, contextuality (“being church differently in different contexts”), creativity (“new forms of mission and polity”), flexibility, recognition of varying valid versions of United Methodism and generosity. Prayerfully considered, these missional principles will lead to “deeper discipleship,” “more faithful service” and a “more unified practice” for being church (10).

Timeline of the Commission’s Work

In **November 2017**, the COWF presented **an interim, preliminary report** to the Council of Bishops. It included **sketches of three possible models** or plans: (1) a greater accountability approach honoring the present language in *The Book of Discipline*; (2) a model removing the restrictive incompatibility language, allowing for greater contextualization for ministry with LGBTQI people; and (3) a model reimagining “the church as a unified core with multiple branches.”(5-6)

After feedback from the COB, the COWF **focused on two of the plans** (The One Church Plan and the Connectional Conference Plan), offering a draft of its final report to the bishops in May 2018. The bishops asked COWF to include the sketch of a Traditionalist Plan, which was developed then in more detail by a small group of bishops. (That plan is referred to as the **Traditional Plan** in the final report.) The Judicial Council then instructed COWF to present its full report to the COB and General Conference for review by all the delegates and the church as a whole.

In late July 2018, the COWF released **its final report** in the four official languages of the General Conference, which will consider the three plans (One Church, Connectional Conference, Traditional) during its special session. All three plans speak to the current divisions in The United Methodist Church around issues of LGBTQI marriage and ordination and suggest specific changes to *The Book of Discipline*. A majority – but not all – of COWF members are recommending the One Church Plan as does a majority of the Council of Bishops.

The final report reflects the COWF’s prayerful process characterized by:

- ongoing collaborative help and guidance from the Council of Bishops,
- in-depth conversations shaped by the key foundational ideas,
- commitment to a **covenant** born from study of the Aringer Institute’s *The Anatomy of Peace*,
- Scripture study together,
- reviews of past petitions to General Conference around these issues,
- shared testimonies and experiences,
- research including other denominations’ experiences with conflict around human sexuality, and
- thoughtful feedback through conversations with pastors and laity across the connection, including general boards and agencies, Methodist/Wesleyan scholars, theological schools, seminary students and other UM-affiliated organizations and constituencies.

The COWF’s final report embodies a clear understanding of its purpose to serve the whole church by helping “inform deliberation” by the **Council of Bishops** and the **General Conference** as it does its decision-making during the special session.

The report includes:

- (1) a **Preamble** with the story of the Commission on a Way Forward (1-10)
- (2) Details of the **One Church Plan** (11-25) and the **Connectional Conference Plan** (26-54)
- (3) Sketch of a **Traditionalist Plan** (55-57)
- (4) **Four Appendices** describing
 - a. **conversations** between the COWF and the COB about churches desiring to change their relationship with The United Methodist Church (**Appendix 1**) (58-59);
 - b. the **Council of Bishops’ account of its leadership and relationship** with the COWF and **rationale for recommending the One Church Plan**. (**Appendix 2**) (60-62);
 - c. a **fully articulated “Traditional Plan”** created by a several bishops (**Appendix 3**) (62-84);
 - d. a **Wespath Benefits and Investments** report analyzing the **pension Impacts of the three plans** (One Church, Connectional Conference, Traditionalist) (85-93).

MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD

Note: While the Commission's report listed the members by name only, this summary includes some additional information to illustrate the diversity of the group.

Jorge Acevedo, USA, Florida, elder, male

Brian Adkins, USA, California, elder, male

Jacques Umembudi Akasa, Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, laity, male

Tom Berlin, USA, Virginia, elder, male

Matt Berryman, USA, Illinois, laity, male

Helen Cunanan, Philippines, elder, female

David Field, Europe, Switzerland, laity, male

Grant Hagiya, USA, California, bishop, male

Aka Dago-Akribi Hortense, Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, laity, female

Scott Johnson, USA, New York, laity, male

Jessica LaGrone, USA, Kentucky, elder, female

Thomas Lambrecht, USA, Texas, elder, male

MyungRae Kim Lee, USA, New York, laity, female

Julie Hager Love, USA, Kentucky, deacon, female

Mazvita Machinga, Africa, Zimbabwe, laity, female

Patricia Miller, USA, Indiana, laity, female

Mande Guy Muyombo, Africa, Zambia, bishop, male (elder in Democratic Republic of Congo when appointed)

Eben Nhiwatiwa, Africa, Zimbabwe, bishop, male

Dave Nuckols, USA, Minnesota, laity, male

Casey Langley Orr, USA, Texas, deacon, female

Gregory Palmer, USA, Ohio, bishop, male

Donna Pritchard, USA, Oregon, elder, female

Tom Salsgiver, USA, Pennsylvania, elder, male

Robert Schnase, USA, Texas, bishop, male

Jasmine Rose Smothers, USA, Georgia, elder, female

Leah Taylor, USA, Texas, laity, female

Debra Wallace-Padgett, USA, Alabama, bishop, female

Rosemarie Wenner, Europe, Germany, bishop, female

Alice Williams, USA, Florida, laity, female

John Wesley Yohanna, Africa, Nigeria, bishop, male

Alfiado S. Zunguza, Africa, Mozambique, elder, male

Moderators

Sandra Steiner Ball, USA, West Virginia, bishop, female

Ken Carter, USA, Florida, bishop, male

David K. Yemba, Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, bishop, male

--This summary was developed by David C. Teel, freelance writer and editor based in Nashville, Tennessee and former academic editor at Abingdon Press.