

## **Report of the Delegations to the 2020 General Conference of The United Methodist Church**

Thank you for trusting us to be your delegates to the 2020/2024 General Conference. Technically, we attended as the legacy Memphis and Tennessee delegations, but in spirit and practice we were one delegation from the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference (TWK).

As a General Conference, we continued to grapple with the complexity of being a worldwide church and how we can create space to fulfill our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To that end, we took several steps that will enable the church to make those disciples in the different contexts in which United Methodists find themselves.

Delegates voted to adopt a plan calling for world-wide regionalization across the whole church and created a committee to implement that plan. As in the past, the plan for regionalization requires constitutional amendments that must be adopted by a two-thirds aggregate of annual conference members across the entire United Methodist Church. Most annual conferences, the TWK included, will not be voting on these amendments until 2025. If the approval threshold is met, then regionalization will create four new regions across the world: Africa, Europe, Philippines, and the United States.

Once created, Regional Conferences will have the authority to amend the adaptable parts of *The Book of Discipline*. Regionalization has the aim of giving church regions equal authority and autonomy to make decisions that are applicable to their specific context without burdening the entire church. For example, without regionalization, the entire General Conference must vote on matters of clergy benefits that only affect clergy in the United States. All other regions of the Church have local or regional governance over their own region-specific matters. A benefit to moving legislation on U.S. specific matters to a U.S. Regional Conference will allow more time during General Conference for Christian conferencing on topics that are important to the entire denomination.

General Conference passed two other pieces of legislation requiring constitutional amendments to be ratified by the conferences across the church. One addresses racism by amending Article V to read: "The United Methodist Church commits to confronting and eliminating all forms of racism, racial inequity, colonialism, white privilege, and white supremacy, in every facet of its life and in society at large." It also updates the definition of racism now in the constitution. The second amendment adds to ¶4. Article IV, the words gender and ability so that it reads, "Inclusiveness of the Church—The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, *gender*, *ability*, color, national origin, status, or economic condition shall be" eligible to participate in the life of the church.

After fifty years of debate, legislation passed by the General Conference removed the prohibition of pastors from officiating and churches from hosting same-gender marriages (affirmed by Judicial Council Decision #1503). This allows space for clergy and churches to follow their conscience regarding this matter. Clergy and churches are neither prohibited nor required to officiate or host same-gender marriages.

Furthermore, language prohibiting the ordination of LGBTQ persons in the UMC was removed and this change was made effective at the close of the General Conference.

Another significant change is the return of sacramental authority (celebrating Holy Communion and baptisms) to ordained deacons within appropriate ministry contexts.

After twelve years of feedback from churches and church leaders across the connection, Revised Social Principles were presented and adopted. Attempting to address different national laws, viewpoints, and customs across Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and the United States, marriage was defined as being between a man and a woman or between two adults of consenting age. This expanded definition addresses traditional views of marriage while providing space for same gender weddings to be recognized. The Church remains committed to ending child marriage, calling for consent in sexual relationships and mutual consent in marriage. This definition makes the Social Principles a worldwide document for United Methodists.

Delegates approved a 2025-2028 budget of \$373.4 million. That total is contingent on collection rates being at 90 percent or more for the next two years. If giving is below that percentage, the budget bottom line will be \$353.6 million. The total approved is significantly smaller than the budget approved by the 2016 General Conference. All annual conferences will be asked to pay some 41 percent less in General Church apportionments.

The General Conference received a request from the African Central Conferences to add five additional bishops to their conferences. With the anticipated budget reductions, that number was reduced to two and the current number of 39 bishops in the US was reduced to 32. This reduction in the US bishops will be accomplished through retirements and by not electing any new bishops for the coming quadrennium.

Additionally, to accomplish this reduction the US jurisdictions were directed to adjust the number of bishops assigned to each jurisdiction. As a result, the Southeastern Jurisdiction (SEJ) will be assigned nine bishops in the next quadrennium. This reflects a reduction from the current number of 11. It will be the task of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Committee on Episcopacy (SEJCOE) to recommend to the SEJ the assignment of bishops that will reflect this reduction. The retirement of Bishop McAlilly at the end of August will bring the number of bishops in the SEJ to 10. To get to nine an interjurisdictional transfer will have to take place. This transfer process is a collaborative process between the current bishops appointed in the SEJ and the SEJCOE. We will not know until the SEJ meets in July 2024 whether the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference will be sharing a bishop with another conference.

General Conference also approved a new retirement plan for U.S. clergy called Compass. This new plan will take effect January 1, 2026, and will replace the current Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP). Compass will represent a shift from a hybrid defined benefit/defined contribution retirement plan to a defined contribution retirement plan like what many corporate employers provide. Clergy who are participants in the previous retirement plans offered by Wespath will receive the benefits from those plans in retirement or will continue to receive them if already retired.

The General Conference defeated legislation to reinstate, or continue, provisions for separation from the United Methodist Church as provided by Paragraph 2553 which came to an end December 31, 2023. As a measure of hope, legislation passed to enable conferences to create a pathway for churches to reunite with The United Methodist Church if desired.

During the election of members to the Judicial Council (the denomination's top court), Tom Lee, from the TWK was elected as a reserve member. Positions were also filled on the Commission on the General Conference, University Senate, general boards and agencies of the church and other entities, as well as trustees to John Street United Methodist Church in New York, the oldest continuously operating United Methodist church in the United States. However, no TWK delegates were elected to these positions.

Members of our delegation and conference shared leadership in the General Conference. Rev's Rob Martin, Steph Dodge, Marie King, and Kevin Presley all shared in a variety of leadership capacities during scheduled worship

services. Rev. Lynn Hill continued his service on the Commission on General Conference. Lay persons, Holly Neal and David Hayes, served as pages; Josh Shaw served as a subcommittee secretary in the Conferences Legislative Committee and Maggie Taylor served as a subcommittee chair in the Faith and Order Legislative Committee.

Also recognized were Bishop McAlilly's pending retirement in September and Rev. Dr. Lynn Hill's tenure and service on the Commission on the General Conference. Both were presented to the entire body for these recognitions.

A somber moment of the conference was the recognition of delegates, volunteers, bishops, and bishop's spouses who had died since the last General Conference or who were to serve at this General Conference. Included in the list were members of the legacy Memphis and Tennessee delegations, Rev. Dr. Autura Eason Williams and Justice Connie Clark. Also remembered were Head Marshal Rev. David Atkinson, Bishop Bob, and his widow, Sybil Spain, and Mrs. Ruth Handy, widow of Bishop W.T. Handy and mother of Rev. Dr. Stephen Handy, of our delegation.

A similar moment occurred as the formal apology was read on behalf of the United Methodist Church to victims of violence suffered at the hand of clergy or other persons associated with The United Methodist Church. This same apology will be read at every annual conference across United Methodism.

Other significant action taken by the General Conference included:

- an apology for the role of Methodists in the overthrow of the kingdom of Hawaii in 1893;
- changing the Division on Ministries with Young People to the Young People's Connectional Network;
- a full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church which will be voted on by the Episcopal Church in 2027;
- several creation care petitions, including one calling for the formation of green teams in churches, districts, and conferences, and another that urges the whole denomination to join in net-zero pledges already made by United Methodist boards and agencies.

Respectfully Submitted,

Seated Delegates: Harriet Bryan, Jim Allen, Stephen Handy, Maggie Taylor, Marie King, Tom Lee, Sam McGlothlin, George Brown, Rob Martin, Josh Shaw, Amanda Hartmann Westmoreland, and Solomon Christian.

Reserve Delegates: Jefferson Furtado, Leslie Hotzfeld, Paul Purdue, Rachel Hagedwood, Holly Neal, John Pearce, Steph Dodge, Sara Corum, Elyse Bell, and Melba Mitchell.

Delegates Unable to Attend: Laura Brantley and David Reed.