

Amendment #4: Educational Requirements for Clergy Members

- **What is the context for this change?** The current Constitution requires educational standards for clergy to be “the same” throughout the connection (§304.3). While this reflects a desire for consistency, it has posed challenges for central conferences outside the United States where access to theological education (especially institutions recognized by the University Senate) may be limited or nonexistent. The rigidity has at times hindered indigenous leadership development and contextualized ministry.
- **What has inspired this amendment?** The need for this change has long been voiced by leaders in central conferences, particularly in Africa, the Philippines, and parts of Europe. Many of these regions do not have access to University Senate-approved theological schools. The uniform requirement created unintended exclusion from leadership roles. Over the years, task forces, connectional tables, and central conference representatives have raised this issue, urging the General Conference to allow for contextual equivalence. Thus, this amendment seeks to balance world-wide consistency with local equity, ensuring all parts of the church can raise up qualified leaders without being penalized for geographic and economic disparities.
- **How are equivalent requirements determined?** If the amendment is ratified, central conferences will determine what counts as equivalent to an M.Div., based on their local educational context and standards. Should Amendment #1 pass as well, regional conferences would make this determination.
- **Does this apply only to licensed local pastors?** While Paragraph 35 applies to all clergy, the change proposed by this amendment only applies to local licensed pastors, and most greatly impacts those serving in central conferences outside of the United States.
- **Will this change impact clergy in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference?** No. Previously, the paragraph required a clergy delegate to have completed a “course of study or an M. Div. degree...” If passed, it would require “course of study or Master of Divinity from a University Senate approved theological school or its equivalent as recognized in a Central Conference...” The TWK Conference already observes this standard.
- **Why are there educational requirements for clergy members? Why can’t a local pastor vote at clergy session, for delegates, or on constitutional amendments?** Educational requirements for clergy voting in General Conference elections exist to ensure that those participating in the governance of the Church have received a foundational level of theological, pastoral, and doctrinal formation.

Licensed local pastors, while appointed to serve congregations, are not members of the annual conference in the same constitutional sense as ordained elders and deacons in full connection. Their relationship to the conference is through their license and appointment, not through permanent membership. As a result, their voting rights are limited to matters that reflect their role and status.

This distinction is rooted in the historical and theological understanding of ordination and conference membership in United Methodism. Voting on constitutional amendments and clergy representation at higher levels of the church is seen as a responsibility tied to full conference

membership, reflecting the connectional accountability and lifelong covenant of ordained ministry. Local pastors serve under annual appointment and are not guaranteed continuity in their role, which differentiates their standing.

The limitation is not about the value of local pastors' ministry, but about the structure of governance and the definitions of membership within the annual conference as established by the Constitution of the UMC.

- **What are some of the objections to this amendment?** Some object to central/regional conferences allowing different standards for education. Some object that the educational requirement—especially for local pastors—creates barriers to participation and could exclude faithful clergy who are actively serving but have not yet completed formal education. However, not ratifying this amendment will not remove the educational requirement. This amendment only clarifies the requirements and allows for contextualization in central/regional conferences.
- **Who could be harmed if this doesn't pass?** In regions with limited educational access, clergy may be disproportionately affected unless equivalent pathways are recognized and implemented. Contextualization will only be possible if the amendment is ratified.

Note: Several questions submitted asked about how this amendment would affect course of study, approved universities, currently credentialed clergy, the current voting status of provisional and associate members, clergy from other fellowships, and the number of delegates elected. The proposed amendment does not address nor affect any of these areas.