In February 2019, The United Methodist Church will gather in St. Louis to choose a way forward as it seeks to create common ground on homosexuality. This is a critical moment in United Methodist history. “Even if nothing gets approved, we will have a different denomination on March 1,” said Bishop LaTrelle Easterling.

Holy Conferencing is a foundation of our United Methodist faith. As the church prepares for this Special Session of General Conference, several informational sessions have been held within the Baltimore-Washington Conference to share accurate information and to address people’s questions.

The Q&A below were gathered from sessions Bishop LaTrelle Easterling held on each of the four regions in the Baltimore-Washington Conference this fall and presentations by the Rev. Tom Lambrecht, a member of the Commission on a Way Forward, at Commission on the Way Forward, at the Grace UMC in Gaithersburg Nov. 28.

What is the UMC’s current stance on homosexuality?

Beliefs about how God’s grace is available to all. And that certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all people. Currently, the denomination “does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Self-avowed, practicing homosexuals are not permitted to be ordained or appointed. Homosexual marriages shall not be conducted by our ministry nor in our churches. The current rules are cited in the 2016 Book of Discipline in paragraphs 161F, 343.2, 341.6, 613.19, and 2702.1. For an overview, visit www.umc.org/what-we-believe/human-sexuality-backgrounder.

What is General Conference and how does it relate to the local church?

General Conference is the top policy-making body of The United Methodist Church and the only entity that speaks officially for the church. It normally meets every four years and is made up of 850 delegates representing the 12 million-member international connection. The two-week sessions are a time of worship, holy conferencing and parliamentary proceedings. The policies and polity passed by General Conference are recorded in the Book of Discipline and the Book of Resolutions. The last time a Special Session was called was in 1970, to organize the union of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches.

How did the Way Forward Commission begin?

At every General Conference since 1972, delegates have sought to change the “ incompatible” language in the Book of Discipline. At the 2016 General Conference, there were an overwhelming number of proposals dealing with issues surrounding same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy. The debate became increasingly divisive. In a vote, the bishops (who have neither voice nor vote at General Conference) were asked to step in and provide leadership. The Council of Bishops created the Commission on a Way Forward and called upon its members to bring a plan that focused on “contextualization and unity” to a called three-day Special Session of General Conference, to be held in February 2019.

Who was on the Commission and what did they produce?

The 32 members of the Commission were chosen by the Council of Bishops. It was a diverse group, with people from nine countries on all sides of the issue, including gay and lesbian members. It was charged with creating a way forward for the denomination that was contextual, offered space for many people as possible and was faithful to the mission of The United Methodist Church. The Commission worked for 18 months, meeting for a total of 26 days. In November 2017, it submitted three “sketches” to the Council of Bishops: the Traditional, One Church and Connectional Conference plans.

How did the Council of Bishops receive the plans?

The Council studied, debated and requested further work on the One Church and Connectional Conference plans and advised setting the Traditional Plan aside. Later, the bishops changed their minds and included the Traditional Plan in those to be submitted to the Special Session.

Why did the Judicial Council review the plans?

Because the Special Session is only three days, church leaders wanted to ensure that the information delegates would be voting on was not unconstitutional before the delegates gathered so that time would not be spent waiting for a declaratory decision.

Continued on next page.
When and where is the 2019 General Conference? 

The Special Session of General Conference will be held Feb. 23-26, 2019, at the Dome, part of the America’s Convention Complex in St. Louis, Missouri.

How will the General Conference delegates move forward in their work at this session?

Normally there are nine to 12 legislative committees that perfect the resolutions that come before the plenary session. At the Special Session, there will be one legislative committee, focusing on this one issue. In a time of holy conferencing and parliamentary procedure, the delegates are expected to perfect the plan they wish to consider. This plan will then go to the body for debate and vote.

Will the delegates consider other resolutions besides the three plans?

Yes, an additional 51 petitions that have been deemed “in harmony” with the call of the Special Session have been received. The 48 petitions from the plan, along with the additional ones, can be found in the Advanced Daily Christian Advocate at www.umc.org/who-we-are/gc2019-advance-edition-daily-christian-advocate.

Who will preside over the legislative session?

One of the officers who served a legislative committee in 2016. The Committee on General Conference will bring a slate of names for members to vote on.

Who will preside over the plenary session?

Members of the Council of Bishops preside over the plenary sessions.

What are the possible outcomes?

The delegates may choose to adopt a revised version of any of the three plans, or they might, for a variety of reasons, change nothing of what has been voted upon.

One thing we do know, Bishop Easterling said, “the mission of the UMC will continue on March 1. We will still be called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. God holds the future of The United Methodist Church.”

Bishop EASTERLING has endorsed the One Church Plan. Why does she support it?

Bishop EASTERLING stands with the more than 80 percent majority of the Council of Bishops who endorsed the One Church Plan. She has said it is her belief that “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral does not agree with the majority of the BWC’s leadership on this issue, this will be held against them during the appointment process.”

Absolutely not. Bishop EASTERLING has pledged, “If I ever use the appointment process as a weapon, I will need to surrender not only my assignment, but my credentials.”

Currently, the bishop and Cabinet take pastors’ theological beliefs and other factors into consideration before making an appointment. The expect this practice to continue. “Pastors’ gifts and graces would be matched with churches that have commensurate theologies.”

If the One Church Plan passes and a clergy person does not agree with the majority of the BWC’s leadership on this issue, will this be held against them during the appointment process?

What does the Bible say about homosexuality that should inform a Way Forward? People who hold the value of Scripture with a deep love of God and a deep love of the Word of God, come down on differing sides of this issue and others. Part of being United Methodist includes the value of loving alike without thinking alike, informed by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Learn more about the Wesleyan quadrilateral at www.umc.org/what-we-believe/wesleyan-quadrilateral.

How will the potential changes affect clergy and other pensions?

What has been paid into the pension plan cannot be taken away. Everyone will still have the money they contributed. However, this is a complex issue. Depending upon the outcome, it might take 20 years to fully resolve itself. Wespath has done some analysis, which is available at www.wespath.org/wayforwardwespapath.
One Church Plan

• The One Church Plan attempts to provide as much space as possible for people who do not share the same views on homosexuality.

• The language that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” will be removed from the Discipline and replaced with “We agree that we are not of one mind regarding human sexuality.” It removes language stating that marriage is just between a man and a woman.

• It does not force or penalize pastors to perform a same-sex wedding nor does it force or penalize churches to hold same-sex wedding ceremonies on their property.

• Each Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry would determine whether to ask questions about whether a person affirms that he/she is LGBT.

• Bishops would not be forced to ordain or not ordain LGBT people if they cannot in good conscience do so.

• This plan would replace the current five jurisdictional conferences (geographic regions in the United States; outside the United States, they are called Central Conferences) with five Connectional Conferences: Progressive, Traditional, and Unity.

• This plan calls for numerous Constitutional Amendments.

• It presents a general Book of Discipline with the ability to adapt other portions to their context for ministry.

• Local churches would choose which Connectional Conference they would join; laity may find themselves in a church that votes to join a CC with which they do not agree.

• Clergy would choose which Connectional Conference they would join.

• Jurisdictional Conferences would vote to join a Connectional Conference; annual conferences who want to join a different Connectional Conference may do so by vote.

For more information, visit www.bwcumc.org/awayforward

Connectional Conference Plan

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Starnes offers insights on Judicial Council rulings

By Melissa Lauber

United Methodists move forward in determining the church’s stance on human sexuality issues, the Judicial Council met in late October to examine the three plans being brought to the Special Session of General Conference.

Tom Starnes, the chancellor of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, was in Switzerland for the Judicial Council hearing.

Starnes, a partner at Drinker, Biddle and Reath LLP in Washington, D.C., did not speak in his official role. Rather, as a son of the church and someone whose faith intersects with his passion for the law, Starnes had filed an amicus brief on behalf of a group of 24 conference church-chancellors who believe strongly that the unity of The United Methodist Church should be preserved notwithstanding that its members have differing perspectives on issues regarding human sexuality.

During the oral hearing in Zurich on Oct. 23, Starnes presented arguments that both defended the constitutionality of the One Church Plan and challenged the constitutionality of the Traditional Plan. On Oct. 29, the Judicial Council handed down a 58-page opinion that deemed parts of both of those plans to be unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the Council deferred ruling on the Connectional Conference Plan, reasoning that it lacks jurisdiction to assess the constitutionality of proposed legislation that itself includes proposed changes to the constitution. Starnes was invited to attend a Nov. 10 meeting of the delegation of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, who will be voting on which plan to adopt at the upcoming Special Session in St. Louis. In an effort to help the delegation digest the Judicial Council’s lengthy opinion and rulings.

1. A proposal authorizing bishops to seek the non-binding advice of the annual conference session on ordination standards, in order to “inform the Board of Ordained Ministry in its work,” was held to risk “crossing the line between episcopal and administrative functions.”

2. A provision requiring reassignment of a pastor in case of “unresolved disagreement” with a congregation concerning same-sex marriage was held to violate the bishop’s constitutional prerogative to appoint pastors to their charges.

3. A provision that allows bishops to limit the frequency of clergy session votes on ordination standards infringes on the clergy session’s constitutional authority to vote on all matters relating to the character, conference relations, and ordination of clergy.

The Traditional Plan, the United Methodist News Service reported, seeks to enhance enforcement current bans related to homosexuality, including imposing mandatory penalties on violations. Starnes had reservations about whether the Traditional Plan should even come before General Conference. He argued that the Traditional Plan is not “in harmony” with the proposal of the called Special Session, as required by Discipline ¶14, because the Traditional Plan rejects the idea of “preserving unity amid diverse perspectives on human sexuality,” and is instead based on “the presupposition that The United Methodist Church ought to have one unified moral stance on the issues of marriage and sexuality.” The Judicial Council did not agree with Starnes on that issue, but it ruled that certain portions of the Traditional Plan are unconstitutional, including provisions included those seeking to allow congregations to withdraw, in what has been called a “gracious exit,” from the denomination.

The third plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, would reorganize the church in the U.S., with conferences aligning based on theology or perspective on LGBTQ ministry. This plan calls for multiple constitutional amendments and because of this, was not addressed by the Judicial Council during Starnes’ presentation.

Starnes hesitates to predict what might happen when the General Conference meets Feb. 25-28 in St. Louis. However, his love for the church and his understanding of Methodist polity have convinced him, as he said in his brief, that “schism need not be the inevitable result of our connection’s seemingly interminable controversy over human sexuality issues.”
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