

FAQs, Number 1 – The State of The United Methodist Church

Over the past several weeks a number of important developments have occurred in the UM Church. The Wesleyan Covenant Association has received a number of questions regarding them. With this issue of Outlook we are beginning a running FAQ post to help people navigate the latest news. We will archive all FAQs on our [website](#) so people can return to them for information and share it with others.

Why is the Commission on a Way Forward now responsible for formally submitting proposed plans to the special 2019 General Conference meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, February 23-26?

In a [recent ruling](#) from the Judicial Council (essentially our denomination's "Supreme Court," hereafter JC) it became apparent that the JC members believed the Council of Bishops (our church's executive branch, hereafter COB) was usurping a role our church's constitution has reserved for the church's legislative branch (our General Conference). For over a year, the COB believed it could act as a legislative committee and submit legislation to the special called General Conference. Had our bishops persisted in this misunderstanding it is very possible the JC could have ruled the 2019 General Conference and any COB sponsored legislation it approved as unconstitutional. Once the bishops understood their error, they requested that the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) formally submit the legislative petitions the COWF had prepared for the General Conference. (For a brief tutorial on the UM Church's governance structure click [HERE](#).)

What are the proposed plans the Commission on a Way Forward (to learn about the Commission click [HERE](#)) is submitting to the General Conference?

On July 17 the JC published the COWF's proposed plans. It received the plans as an exhibit attached to a petition from the COB requesting the JC issue a declaratory decision on the constitutionality of the COWF's plans. The COWF's full report and proposed plans can now be accessed [HERE](#).

The COWF's three proposed plans represent various options for resolving the church's debate over its sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and ordination standards. In brief, they can be described as follows:

The One Church Plan would have the denomination recognize that marriage is between two people, not explicitly between one man and one woman. It would allow pastors to decide whether or not to preside at same sex weddings, and it would give local churches the right to decide whether or not same sex weddings could take place in their sanctuaries. Finally, it would allow annual conferences to decide whether or not to ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. Essentially, the plan would allow local churches, UM pastors, and local annual conferences to make their own decisions about sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and the ordination standards for clergy. Hence, it is often referred to as the "local option."

The Traditionalist Plan would reaffirm the UM Church's present teachings on these matters and call for enhanced accountability standards in an effort to stem the growing tide of defiance of church teachings on the part of clergy, laity and even some bishops.

The Connectional Conference Plan would create three branches of the church: one for centrists, one for progressives, and one for traditionalists. While the three branches would share responsibility and receive support from a number of general church boards and agencies, and operate under a unified Council of Bishops, each branch would have a significant degree of autonomy when it came its sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and its ordination standards.

Why did the Council of Bishops recently amend its April 2017 call for the special General Conference?

UM Church General Conferences are scheduled to meet every four years. However, if the COB believes circumstances warrant it, it has the power to call for a special General Conference. In its call it must state the specific reason for convening such a gathering, and unless two-thirds of the delegates approve otherwise, only the business in harmony with the purpose stated in the COB's call can be addressed at a special General Conference.

The idea of convening a special General Conference originated at the last General Conference that met in Portland, Oregon, in May of 2016. The General Conference delegates empowered the COB to create a special commission to address the long debate over the UM Church's sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and its ordination standards. The 2016 General Conference delegates also stated that if necessary, and if time allowed, the COB could call for a special General Conference to deliberate on any proposed plans.

In April of 2017 the COB made such a call. However, its call did not conform to the purpose as originally outlined by the delegates at the 2016 General Conference. The delegates expressly stated they wanted to see the work and proposals that the special commission developed. However, the COB's call sought to create a situation where it would receive the work of the special commission (i.e., the COWF), create its own preferred legislative proposal, and only allow its proposal to officially come before the called General Conference. Essentially, the COB was acting like a legislative body rather than as an executive one, a violation of our church's constitution.

Again, the recent JC decision strongly intimated that the COB's understanding of their role in this process was seriously mistaken, and therefore its proposals and the entire special General Conference could be declared unconstitutional. Recently, the COB amended its original call so it is now in conformity with the intent of the 2016 General Conference delegates.

It is now clear that the called 2019 General Conference will receive three legislative proposals from the COWF, not from the COB.