

FAQs, Number 2: The State of The United Methodist Church

Over the past several weeks a number of important developments have occurred in the UM Church, and the Wesleyan Covenant Association has received a number of questions regarding them. This is the second issue of Outlook attempting to help WCA members navigate the latest news. You can see our first FAQs by clicking [HERE](#).

Earlier this year, the Council of Bishops (COB) said the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) report, with its accompanying plans and petitions, would be released on July 8, 2018. Then earlier this month the church was informed the report, plans and petitions would not be released until some time later this year. Not long after that it was announced the material would be made available on July 30. Why and how were all the documents released last week?

The COB did indicate earlier this year that the report would be released by July 8, 2018. In hindsight, it would have been wiser for the COB to have simply stated that according to the rules governing General Conference the report and the proposed petitions had to be *submitted* to the secretary of the General Conference by July 8. Given that The United Methodist Church is a global denomination, it has four official languages (English, French, Kiswahili, and Portuguese), and therefore any petitions submitted to the General Conference must be translated so all United Methodists can review them. Naturally, if the COWF's report and petitions were submitted on or even a few weeks before the July 8 deadline, a significant period a time would be necessary to translate them.

Given that the COWF report and petitions were submitted just a few days before the deadline, that other United Methodists submitted petitions as well (as they are entitled to do), and that all the material totaled more than 200 pages, General Conference organizers estimated it would take three or four months before all the material could be translated. This delay seemed unacceptable to many UM leaders so a way was found to expedite the process. Hence, the announcement that the COWF report, its petitions, and all others would be made available in all four official languages by July 30.

Concurrent with these developments, the [COB petitioned the Judicial Council](#) (the UM Church's "Supreme Court," hereafter JC) for a declaratory decision regarding the constitutionality of the three COWF plans coming before the 2019 General Conference. Before delegates vote on them, the COB is trying to ascertain whether or not various provisions in the plans are in conformity with the church's constitution. (After long days of debate, delegates at the 2012 General Conference passed a major plan to restructure parts of the church. Within a day, the Judicial Council ruled the plan was in violation of the constitution and therefore could not be implemented.)

Obviously, in order for the JC to render rulings on the COWF plans it must review them and the petitions enabling them. In the interest of transparency and fairness, the JC is required by church rules to make public all matters coming before it. It must meet this requirement by a fixed number of days before its next scheduled meeting (October 23-26, 2018 in Zurich, Switzerland). The COB duly forwarded to the JC the COWF report, plans, and petitions as an exhibit to its petition for a declaratory decision. And, as required by UM Church rules, the JC published all the material accordingly. This is how the COWF report, plans and petitions became available last week on July 17.

It should be noted that the JC could decide it is inappropriate for it (the church's judicial branch) to rule on petitions duly before the General Conference (the church's legislative branch). It has so ruled in the past, and some believe it will do so again in this instance. The

JC's reticence to rule on petitions that *might* be enacted stems from its concern that it could be seen as short-circuiting the legislative process.

Who are the delegates attending the special called General Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, February 23-26, 2019, and how were they selected?

All but ten of the 864 delegates attending the special called General Conference were elected in their annual conferences prior to the regularly scheduled 2016 General Conference held in Portland, Oregon. Each annual conference is apportioned a number of delegates that are roughly representative of the size of the conference's laity and clergy membership. An equal number of clergy and laity are elected in each annual conference, so if an annual conference is apportioned a total of ten delegates, it will elect five laity and five clergy.

In the rare event that a special, called General Conference is convened, such as the one in St. Louis next February, the delegates elected to serve at the last General Conference are entitled to attend. However, if an annual conference would like to hold a special election for a new slate of delegates, it may do so. Most annual conferences send the delegates they elected for the previous General Conference. It is estimated that 90 percent or more of the delegates elected to attend the 2016 conference will return for the 2019 gathering.

Annual Conferences from Africa will send a total of 260 delegates; Europe and Eurasia will send 40, The Philippines 50, and the United States 504. Ten delegates from what are called concordat churches (i.e., the Methodist Church of the Americas and the Caribbean, the Methodist Church in Britain, the Methodist Church of Mexico, and the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico) also attend the conference. Although these delegates are not members of The United Methodist Church they are accorded the right of voice and vote at General Conferences.

Can any United Methodist attend the special 2019 General Conference to observe the proceedings, and if so, is there an admission fee?

Yes, all United Methodists (and the general public) can attend the 2019 General Conference.

Earlier this year it was announced that, for the first time, the church would charge United Methodists and others an admission fee to observe the conference. Two reasons for a fee were cited: First, since the conference was unplanned, no funds had been budgeted for it. The church's financial organization, the General Commission on Finance and Administration (GCFA), found ways to cover the majority of the costs for the conference, but claimed it was still short by approximately \$700,000. It proposed charging a \$200 admission fee to attend all the sessions in order to cover the short fall. And two, some people believed an admission fee would discourage the types of protests that have disrupted the gathering going back to at least the 2000 General Conference.

United Methodists, representing centrists, progressives, and traditionalists, complained about the proposed fee, and particularly about what was regarded by many as an exorbitant charge. Whether the complaints had their intended effect, the church announced earlier this month that [funds had been found to cover the](#) short fall, and therefore it had decided no admission fee would be required to observe the proceedings. Observers will still be required to pay a nominal amount for credentialing services and a badge (\$7 pre-General Conference and \$10 at the door). These fees, which have been charged in the past, offset the cost of venue security.

Those planning to attend one or more days of the conference should move quickly to secure lodging. In addition to the 864 delegates, numerous church officials, staff, and volunteers will also be in attendance. Many of the hotel rooms are already filled, and others nearby are likely to fill in the near future.