

## **Details of the Connectional Conference Plan**

The Connectional Conference Plan is the most complicated of the three proposals coming before the General Conference. It attempts to treat all perspectives on the church's stance regarding LGBT persons fairly and equally. Due to the great complexity, I will not be able to cover all the details involved in the plan, but I will describe the broad approaches that the plan takes.

The essence of the Connectional Conference Plan is to create three new theological jurisdictions (called "connectional conferences") in place of the current five geographical jurisdictions. Each connectional conference would cover the entire United States. There would be a Traditional Conference that would maintain the current *Discipline's* prohibition of same-sex marriage and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. There would be a Unity Conference that would neither forbid nor require same-sex marriage and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals (this branch would be similar to what the One Church Plan envisions, but only for this branch). And there would be a Progressive Conference that would require and expect all pastors to perform same-sex weddings and all its annual conferences to ordain and appoint practicing homosexual clergy.

There would be a sorting process designed to limit the number of votes that would be needed. Current jurisdictions would vote first on which of the connectional conferences they want to affiliate with. (All jurisdictional property would then go with that connectional conference.) Any annual conference that disagreed with the decision of its jurisdiction could vote to join a different connectional conference. (All annual conference property, assets, and liabilities would go with the annual conference wherever it decided to affiliate.) Any local church that disagreed with the decision of its jurisdiction or annual conference could vote to join a different connectional conference. (All local church property, assets, and liabilities would go with the local church.) No local church would need to vote unless it disagreed with the decision of higher-up entities. Any vote by any church body to realign with a different connectional conference (once the plan is implemented) could happen no more frequently than in four years from a previous vote, in order to minimize continuing conflict and membership "churn."

Bishops and clergy would similarly choose which connectional conference they wanted to join, with a possibility of transitional appointments until a suitable appointment is found for them in their preferred connectional conference. Clergy could serve in a different connectional conference, with the approval of that conference, as long as they adhered to the requirements of that conference.

There is some question whether all three connectional conferences would be populated, with the possibility that many progressives might stick with a Unity Conference instead of forming their own conference. But that decision would be up to each jurisdiction, annual conference, local church, and clergy person, rather than being dictated by the plan itself. There is no doubt that many annual conference boundaries would need to be redrawn and new annual conferences formed. There would be two or three annual conferences covering each geographical location in the United States. Each new connectional conference could determine whether or not it wanted to have jurisdictions as part of its new structure (hopefully with another name).

Under the Connectional Conference Plan, the primary identity would be the connectional conference. Some of the powers of the General Conference would be shifted to the connectional conference, including:

- Determining the number of bishops needed, electing the bishops, and funding the bishops (no funding for a bishop in the U.S. would come from a different connectional conference).
- Determining the qualifications, powers, and duties of clergy, including accountability through the complaint process.

- Determining the qualifications, powers, and duties of bishops, including accountability through the connectional conference college of bishops.
- Adapting most of the *Book of Discipline* according to its theological perspective.
- Holding its bishops accountable to the connectional conference rules and requirements.
- Creating whatever boards and agencies the connectional conference believes it needs to enhance effectiveness in ministry.

All three connectional conferences would still be part of The United Methodist Church, but each would have much more autonomy to operate in the way it believes would be most helpful and consistent with its theological perspective. The general church would consist of:

- A *General Book of Discipline* including the doctrinal standards and theological task, ministry of all Christians, new global social principles, and provisions governing all shared agencies.
- A shortened General Conference, mostly for celebration, sharing of best practices, and governing those parts of the church shared by all the connectional conferences.
- A redefined Council of Bishops, caring for ecumenical relationships, fostering cross-connection ministries and partnerships, and serving as a learning and support community for bishops (This redefined COB would not have supervisory authority over the bishops or over the connectional conferences, as that function would pass to each connectional college of bishops.).
- General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits (Wespath).
- The Publishing House.
- General Council on Finance and Administration.
- United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR).
- Parts of the General Board of Global Ministries as agreed upon by all the connectional conferences.

All the rest of the general boards and agencies would be subject to whether or not any connectional conferences want to continue to participate in them. Continuing agencies could serve one, two, or all three connectional conferences, and funding would be apportioned from only those conferences participating. Connectional conferences could also contract with specific agencies for fee-based services as desired.

The current central conferences outside the United States would be renamed as connectional conferences and be given equal power and authority with the US connectional conferences. Each non-U.S. connectional conference could remain separate as it is, join with other connectional conferences in its area, or join one of the three U.S. connectional conferences. If annual conferences in a given area realigned, non-U.S. connectional conference boundaries might need to be redrawn. Funding for bishops and ministries outside the U.S. would be shared by all three U.S. connectional conferences, as it currently is.

Enactment of this plan would require nine constitutional amendments that would hopefully be approved and ratified as a package. Implementation of the plan would take until 2023, and the 2024 General Conference would be shifted to 2025, moving the four-year cycle of General Conference so that it does not coincide with United States presidential election years.