

UNY Post General Conference Gathering March 17, 2019

Bishop Mark J. Webb

Welcome to this gathering of clergy and laity of the Upper New York Conference. I am grateful you chose to be a part of this time. We are gathered together in places throughout our annual conference for worship, prayer, Christian fellowship and to hear together the decisions of the special session of General Conference.

This is not a perfect format. I wish we could have easily found a way to gather in one place that made sense, but I'm grateful we have the technology to connect in this way across the conference. I do believe through this format, we will experience the movement of the Holy Spirit and we can begin the journey of examining how we move forward as followers of Jesus Christ in the United Methodist Church in Upper New York.

As we begin we want to join our hearts with people around the world in response to the mosque mass shootings in New Zealand that abruptly ended 50 precious lives as they gathered to pray. Again, we have seen the reality of hatred, darkness and evil within our world. We are reminded of the need for the Christian Church to stand up and offer the light of Christ, the hope of a different way. I encourage us to reach out to the Muslim community around us and let them know that we stand with them in this tragic moment. May we counter the acts of evil with acts of love and grace. As we continue to be a part of the cry in word and action to change a broken system regarding violence, racism, bias and discrimination, may we also allow God to use us to be a part of the heart-transforming work that only Jesus can do, first in us and then by offering Christ to the world.

Over the last few days some of you have submitted questions that you have in anticipation of this time. I call your attention to the email address on the screen where you can submit questions as we meet. Some of the questions will be addressed in what we have planned to share, others will be addressed as time allows in this gathering and all of them will be answered and posted on a Frequently Asked Questions page on our conference website.

There is tremendous pain throughout the United Methodist Church in Upper New York and around the world. The LGBTQIA community is hurting because of the decisions of the special session and their experience that the church they love is shutting the door to them and saying they are not worthy of God's love. Those who hold convictions that the church's stance on homosexuality must change are deeply disappointed, hurt, frustrated and angry. Those who support the decision of the General Conference because of their convictions are struggling with being labeled as judgmental and hateful even though they believe that all are sacred in the eyes of God and that all are welcome and in need of the ministry of the Church.

The division, political maneuvering and ugly rhetoric that filled the arena in St. Louis has continued and we find ourselves in a place where we do not trust one another. We too easily see one another as the enemy and too quickly demonize those we believe do not agree with us. We are a people right now who are quick to speak and slow to listen. Our witness to the world is being diminished and our ability to effectively live our mission is being compromised.

We need healing! We need to humble ourselves before God and one another. We need to forgive one another. We need to breathe deeply the Spirit of God, turning our hearts toward God and opening our hearts to one another. In the midst of our pain, our current turmoil we need to seek the new thing that God desires to do in each one of us – in the church known as The United Methodist Church.

I invite us to a time of worship!

I want to offer a summary of the petitions that were supported by the delegates of the special session of The General Conference. All these petitions will be reviewed for constitutionality by the Judicial Council at their April 2019 meeting. All the petitions, except for two have been reviewed at least once previously by the Judicial Council. This gives us some indication as to what will be constitutional and what will be unconstitutional. However, the decision of the Judicial Council that I believe will come around May 1 will offer us definitive answers. All petitions deemed constitutional will become a part of The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* effective January 1, 2020.

Let me start with what did not change. First from our social principles:

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

Our stance regarding marriage and pastoral leadership has not changed:

The prohibition regarding self-avowed practicing homosexuals being certified as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church remains. (para. 304.3)

The prohibition regarding ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions being conducted by our ministers or in our churches remains. (para 341.6)

A general overview of the actions of the special session

- The Simple Plan was not affirmed by legislative committee by a vote of 60.47% - 39.53% (494-323)
- The One Church Plan as a minority report was not affirmed by a vote of 53.04% - 46.96% (436-386)
- The Traditional Plan was affirmed by a vote of 53.28% - 46.72% (438-384).

The petitions acted upon by The General Conference

Wespath Petition 90016 – Pension Responsibilities – Par. 1504

Amended ¶1504 to provide that local churches that change the nature of their connection to the Church must pay a proportional fair share of the annual conference’s unfunded pension liability and that nothing in the foregoing would prevent annual conferences from collecting other financial obligations from local churches.

Constitutional: **YES**

Wespath Petition 90017 – CRSP Amendment – Par. 1504

Amended corresponding Clergy Retirement Security Program documents so that any clergy members who end their relationship with a conference will be treated as “terminated vested” participants, meaning their accrued benefits would be safe and converted to an individual account balance. However, clergy no longer in the denomination are removed from the denomination’s defined benefit and annuity risk pools for their former annual conference and could not receive any additional benefits conferences add down the line.

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #1 – Petition 90032 – Footnote 1 Qualifications for Ministry – Par. 304.3

Amended footnote 1 attached to ¶ 304.3 to read: “Self-avowed practicing homosexual” is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, Board of Ordained Ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual; or is living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union, or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual.

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #2-4–Petitions 90033-35 – Episcopal Accountability – Par. 408.3, 410 & 422

Amended ¶¶ 408, 410 and 422 to make bishops subject to disciplinary review by the entire Council of Bishops rather than just the College of Bishops in a bishop’s own jurisdiction.

Constitutional: **NO**

Traditional Plan #5- Petition 90036 – Episcopal Responsibilities – Par. 415.6

Amended ¶ 415.6 was amended to prohibit bishops from consecrating bishops who are self-avowed homosexuals even if they have been elected. Bishops are prohibited from commissioning or ordaining those on the deacon or elder track if the Board of Ordained Ministry has determined the individual is a self-avowed homosexual, even if the Board of Ordained Ministry recommends and clergy session approves them.

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #6 – Petition 90037 – Composition of Board of Ordained Ministry – Par. 635.1a

Amended ¶ 635 to “Prior to being nominated for membership on the Board of Ministry by the bishop, any individual must certify to the bishop that he or she will uphold, enforce, and maintain the *Book of Discipline* in its entirety, including but not limited to all qualifications for ordination (¶¶304, 330, 335, 336). Additionally, the bishop must certify to the annual conference secretary that he or she only has nominated individuals who will uphold, enforce, and maintain the *Book of Discipline* in its entirety, including but not limited to the qualifications for ordination (¶¶304, 330, 335, 336)

Constitutional: **UNCERTAIN**

*The original petition was ruled unconstitutional in previous decisions of the Judicial Council, but it was amended per above by the plenary and approved. The Constitutionality is uncertain because the Judicial Council has not ruled on this petition as amended.

Traditional Plan #7 – Petition 90038 – Full Examination – Par. 635.2h

Amended ¶ 635.2 stating the Board of Ordained Ministry shall conduct an examination to ascertain whether an individual is a practicing homosexual, as defined by The *Book of Discipline*, including information on social media. The Board shall certify that such an examination has occurred.

Constitutional: **NO**

Traditional Pan #8-9 – Petition 90039-90040 – Composition of Board of Ordained Ministry – Par. 806.9 & 613.19

Amended ¶¶ 806 & 613 to state that annual conferences certify that the bishop has nominated only members of the Board of Ministry who will uphold, enforce, and maintain ~~te~~ *Book of Discipline* related to ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals. Failure to do so shall result in The General Council on Finance and Administration withholding all funds from The United Methodist Church and withdrawing the annual conference’s ability to use the denominational cross and flame logo.

Constitutional: **NO**

Traditional Plan #11 – Petition 90042 – Minimum Penalty – Par. 2711.3

Amended ¶ 2711.3 to establish a minimum penalty if someone is convicted of conducting ceremonies or same-sex weddings of one-year suspension without pay (first offense), and termination (second offense)

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #12 – Petition 90043 – Qualifications for Ministry – Par. 304.5

Amended ¶ 304.5 to state that The District Committee on Ordained Ministry and the Board of Ordained Ministry shall not approve or recommend any person for candidacy, licensing, commissioning, or ordination who does not meet the qualifications of ¶ 304.1-3. The bishop presiding in the clergy session shall rule any such unqualified candidate out of order and not eligible to be acted upon.

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #13 – Petition 90044 – Complaint Process – Par. 362.1e & 413.3d

Amended ¶¶ 362 & 413 to state that bishops can only dismiss a complaint if it has no basis in law or fact and the reason for dismissal is shared with the complainant.

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #14 – Petition 90045 – Just Resolution – Par. 362.1c, 413.3c, 2701.5 & 2706.5.c.3

Amended “Just Resolution” provisions in ¶¶ 362.1, 413.3c, 2701.5, 2706.5.c.3 to provide: Just resolutions shall state all identified harms and how they shall be addressed by the Church and other parties to the complaint.” In cases where the respondent acknowledges action(s) that are a clear violation of the provisions of the *Discipline*, a just resolution shall include, but not be limited to, a commitment not to repeat the action(s) that were a violation.

Constitutional: **YES & NO**

*Second Sentence starting with “In cases where the respondent . . .” was previously ruled unconstitutional.

Traditional Plan #15 – Petition 90046 – Just Resolution - Par. 362.1c, 413.3c, 2701.5 & 2706.5.c.3

Amended ¶¶ 362.1, 413.3c, 2701.5, 2706.5.c.3 by adding the same sentence to all four as follows: “No matter where in the process a just resolution is achieved, the complainant(s) shall be a party to the resolution process and every effort shall be made to have the complainant(s) agree to the resolution before in may take effect.

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #16 – Petition 90047 – Church Appeal – Par. 2715.10

Amends ¶ 2715.10 to provide that the Church (not just the Respondent) can appeal a trial court judgment to the committee on appeals and then to the Judicial Council “based on egregious errors of Church law or administration that could reasonably have affected the findings of the trial court.”

Constitutional: **YES**

Traditional Plan #10 – Petition 90041 – Traditional Plan Implementation Process – New Para. 2801

Add a new ¶ 2801 that established an implementation process requiring annual conferences to vote support or nonsupport of disciplinary language by March 31, 2020, allowing annual conferences to form a self-governing church, allowing congregations and clergy to join a self-governing church.

*This petition was not supported by the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters and was not enacted by the plenary of General Conference. It never came to the floor for a vote.

Traditional Plan #17 – Petition 90048 – Concordat Churches – Par. 570 & 574.1

Amend ¶¶ 570 & 574.1 to create the option of concordat churches in the United States.

*This petition was not supported by the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters and was not enacted by the plenary of General Conference. It never came to the floor for a vote.

Petition 90066 – Minority Report – Disaffiliation – NEW Par. 2553

The Minority Report amended the original petition 90066 adding to Chapter 6, Church Property a new section VIII – Disaffiliation of Local Churches Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality that would add a new ¶ 2553.

Constitutional: **UNCERTAIN**

*The original petition was previously ruled by the Judicial Council to be unconstitutional. The Council of Bishops has requested a declaratory decision regarding the constitutionality of the minority report that was passed. The COB is arguing that the minority report is unconstitutional.

Petition 90015 – Central Conference Implementation Time – Par. 543.17

Amended ¶ 543.17 to state that legislation passed at the 2019 called session shall not take effect in Central Conferences until 12 months after the close of the 2020 General Conference to afford the necessary time to organize a Central Conference.

Constitutional: **YES**

Let me address some of the questions that have been submitted. Thank you for engaging in the conversation this way. I want you to know that we received questions, and statements. I will continue to read everything that is submitted, and we will address to the best of our ability every question and include them in the FAQ that will be published on the conference website, along with the portion of the PowerPoint that deals with the legislative action of the special session and a recording of this entire event.

We are a deeply divided Church. We continue to harm one another, limit one another's ability to practice ministry in ways that match our sense of God's call upon our lives. We continue to get in the way of the witness all of us desire for the Church amid our communities and world. Our system is broken. We cannot continue to pursue a resolution in the same ways we have for 47 years.

Since the special session ended, I've been thinking a great deal about the difference between Christian Unity and Denominational Unity.

When I think about Christian unity, I think about the spiritual unity of all people in every place and in every age, who are members of God's household – the body of Christ.

It is a kind of unity that I, as a bishop of the Church, vowed to preserve. It is a kind of unity I hear described by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”

It is a unity which calls us to:

1. Seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit.
2. To know the grace of God through Jesus Christ, be transformed by that grace and live and spread the truth and ways of Jesus.
3. To love one another across boundaries.
4. To serve one another across boundaries.
5. To share a common hope in Christ and Christ alone.

Denominational Unity is different. The working definition of a denomination that I like is an **association** of **some churches** which does not include **all churches**. This has been the reality since New Testament times. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to seek Christian Unity. It is what we affirm in the Apostles Creed when we say we believe in the holy catholic Church. Seeking Christian unity is our calling, but it does not preclude us from being a part of a denomination and seeking denominational unity as well.

I've begun to think out loud if part of our crisis in The United Methodist Church is that we've confused Christian unity with Denominational Unity, applying the principles of Christian Unity to our conversation about denominational unity.

Individuals smarter than me have written about denominational unity and the necessary elements that lead to that unity. Our *Book of Discipline* explains the unity we seek within The United Methodist Church. It reads: "The General *Book of Discipline* reflects our Wesleyan way of serving Christ through doctrine and disciplined Christian life. We are a worldwide denomination united by doctrine, discipline, and mission through our connectional covenant."

1. Unity of Doctrine
2. Unity of Discipline
3. Unity of Mission

The current reality in The United Methodist Church points to the fact that we do not have unity of doctrine – not just in relation to marriage and sexual ethics, but in even more foundational matters such as the authority and interpretation of Scripture, the role of Christ in redemption and the nature of sin to acknowledge a few.

The current reality in The United Methodist Church points to the fact that we do not have unity of Discipline. We have those who, as a matter of conviction and conscience, seek to uphold the Discipline and we have those who, as a matter of conviction and conscience, feel unable to uphold parts of our Discipline. As a denomination one of our crises is our lack of unity of Discipline.

The current reality in The United Methodist Church points to the fact that we may not even have unity of mission. We define very differently what it means to partner with God in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Could it be that our dilemma in the UMC is that we have been pursuing a unity that is not meant within a denomination and therefore can never be achieved? Is there a conversation that will help us find a way to seek after the Christian Unity we desire and are called to pursue while defining a new unity for The United Methodist Church that will have integrity and end the division that has defined us for all these years? Has this experience of the special session brought us to a place where we are willing to think about what we would not in the past? Have conversations that we were unwilling to engage in before the experience of St. Louis? I must believe that God can use our current situation to lead us to a new way – that's the Gospel message isn't it?

Could a fresh conversation using an idea like the Connectional Conference Plan as a starting point help us move toward this new form of unity? We can continue to major on our differences, be overwhelmed by our pain, submit the same petitions and legislation we have been submitting for 47 years or we can seek something different.

We need a new conversation – a new definition of denominational unity that includes our call to seek and model Christian Unity. Perhaps the Connectional Conference Plan can provide a foundation for this conversation. Others in our connection are thinking out loud about a two-church plan. No matter what we start with, we need a new conversation. That seems life-giving to me and something I'm willing to invest my time and energy in with anyone who would join me. Perhaps it is a conversation that will result in the new thing we desire, and God promises to do.

Over the next weeks and months, I will be engaging various small groups in conversations like this. Conversations that will ask the question: How do we support one another and help one another fully live God's call within our lives, while providing the space that honors the convictions of others without compromising the convictions we hold?

I will also be holding regional gatherings of clergy and laity after the Judicial Council decision is released to continue this conversation together. I looked at doing District gatherings but there are simply not enough free days on my calendar between the expected date the decision of the Judicial Council will be released and the beginning of our annual conference session. The dates and times of these regional gatherings will be announced in the next week or so.

In addition, we are planning opportunities at the session of annual conference to continue to care for one another and discuss the current reality of our denomination. I would like to offer an opinion or a prayer regarding annual conference that may or may not be received. I pray that we will not approach annual conference with the same strategies we have used in this discussion to date.

Strategizing in the way we have around elections of delegates to the 2020 General Conference will not move us beyond where we are. Debating the same petitions and resolutions around human sexuality that we have been debating will not move us beyond where we are. What we have been doing and how we have been doing it for the last 47 years does not work. Let's bring a new conversation – a new way of thinking and being together for the sake of every one of us, for the sake of The United Methodist Church we love and for the sake of our witness to the world. If we continue to use the techniques of trying to win others to our side, strategies that only produce winners and losers we will continue to produce the pain and the deep division we are currently experiencing.

I will continue to offer resources and energy to this conversation and how we come to a place of health for all to be who God has called them to be. But I am also going to remind us that our mission has not changed. We still have work to do. We need to focus on becoming even more passionate about helping others come to know Jesus Christ. We must continue to look for ways in which we can be the hands, feet and voice of Christ in the communities we are called to. There is powerful ministry happening in Upper New York and that ministry must continue. There are new possibilities for ministry and mission that we have not yet even dreamed about, and we must move forward into those places.

I'm going to continue to lead in such a way that we do not lose sight of our work to increase the capacity of Christ-following leaders, to increase the number of existing vital congregations that are effectively and fruitfully offering Christ. We are going to continue our work in creating a culture that invites the creation of new faith communities. We are going to continue to equip every congregation to develop a discipleship pathway that moves people from where they are to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ. We are going to continue to provide camp and retreat ministries for people of all ages. We are going to continue to train teams for the purpose of mission work. We are going to grow the scope and impact of our Mission Central HUB. We are going to increase our capacity SO that the kingdom of God grows for the glory of God. That's our purpose!

My commitment is to walk alongside every person during these days. My prayer is that you will be willing to walk alongside me and each of your sisters and brothers in Christ. We must care for one another, so that we can offer the care of Christ to the communities we have been called to serve.

We do not have to agree with one another. I'm certain we won't. We must be willing to engage one another in the hard conversations in a caring and careful spirit. No one must give up on the pursuit of what they believe God is calling the Church to be – BUT we must do it with a spirit of charity. We are called to love one another. We are called to have mutual respect. We are called to offer to one another the very grace that has been offered to us in the one named Jesus.