

Presentation for Central UMC Lenoir City

April 21, 2024 - Scott Layer

Thank you for your time and prayer attention to the General Conference of the United Methodist Church being held in Charlotte North Carolina April 23-May 3. The theme of the gathering is "Be Still and Know that I am God" based on Psalm 46. As our prayer guide says, "as we move closer to General Conference, some of us are anxious, some confused, some worried, some excited and some are open to change."

The purpose of this gathering is to keep you informed and answer questions. We have endeavored over the past year to keep you informed. Many of you are wondering about how General Conference will impact Central UMC and the denomination more broadly. We want to provide you with information and how you can help with General Conference.

The Holston Conference provided a number of pre-conference briefings. At those briefings, they showed a video and had Q & A. You can access the [Holston Conference Briefing Video](#) on Youtube channel of Holston Conference.

Helpful Context - What is The Book of Discipline?

¶ 101. 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. The *General Book of Discipline* expresses that unity. The content of the book of Discipline is:

Part I - The Constitution

Part II - The General Book of Discipline

Part III - Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task (includes articles of religion)

Part IV - The Ministry of All Christians

Part V - Social Principles

Part VI - Organization and Administration (the Local Church, the ministry of the ordained, the superintendency, the conferences, administrative order, church property, judicial administration.

Part VII - Judicial Administration

Basics of General Conference

1. **No individual lay person or clergy speaks for the United Methodist Church.** General Conference meets every four years to speak on behalf of the denomination. The church speaks by approving petitions and making resolutions on theological and social issues.

2. **Activities of general conference** includes worship, appointing of leaders (including Judicial Council), voting and the approving of budget.
3. **The last regular General Conference was held in 2016 in Portland Oregon.** The 2020 General Conference scheduled for Minneapolis was postponed multiple times because of COVID-19. That 2020 Conference that was to be held in 2020 is now being held in Charlotte April 23-May 3. It is considered the 2020 postponed conference held in 2024.
4. **General Conference is composed of annual conference delegates elected from around the world. Half are clergy, half are laity.** There are 862 voting delegates for General Conference. Of the 862, 55.9% come from the US, 32% from Africa, 6% from Philippines, 4.6% Europe.

Larger annual conferences have larger delegations. Holston Conference has 12 delegates. They are Amanda Oaks, Anne Travis, Becky Hall, Del Holley, Donna Mosby, Rev. Dr. Josh Kilbourne, Rev. Kim Goddard, Rev. Lauri Jo Cranford, Rev. Mary Thompson, Rev. Paul Seay, Rev Dr. Randy Frye, Regan Kelly, Rev. Sharon Bowers and Rev. Wil Cantrell. Each delegate is assigned to one of the 14 legislative committees.

5. **There are 1099 valid petitions to be considered.** Each petition is assigned to one of the 14 legislative committees for consideration. The wording of a petition can be edited, amended or combined with other petitions and be recommended for adoption. It is likely that wording will be different than the original submitted petitions.

A simple majority vote can approve petitions. Amending the Constitution of The United Methodist Church requires a two-thirds affirmative vote, followed by a two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of members voting in annual conference sessions. Revoking or changing the Articles of Religion or Confession of Faith requires a two-thirds affirmative vote of the delegates, and three-fourths of the annual conference members must concur.

6. **You may wonder how delegates determine their vote.** The judicial council has ruled that since delegates have been elected without instruction, then they are bound by their individual consciences for the good of the church. They will also consider input they have received from pre-conference briefings, floor debate and what they individually discern God is leading to do.

Major Legislation Proposed

1. **Regionalization** - The United Methodist Church is a connectional, global church. Currently there are seven central conferences outside the US: three in Africa (Africa, Congo, West Africa, a total 30 annual conferences), three in Europe (Central and Southern Europe, Germany, Northern Europe and Eurasia, a total of 20 annual conferences), and one in the Philippines (a total of 24 annual conferences). The US has 54 annual conferences supervised by bishops in 46 episcopal areas.

Central Conferences currently allow for cultural adaptation in part six of the Book of Discipline. This means that matters considered unique to the US are considered at General Conference while matters considered unique to their contexts are handled at their Central Conferences.

The Connectional Table, The Christmas Covenant Team, and the Central Conference Matters standing committee are proposing the development of four regional conferences: Africa, Europe, Philippines, and the United States. Regional Conferences would not be able to change parts 1-5 of book of discipline which include our constitutional, doctrinal standards, our theological task, the ministry of all christians, and social principles. Portions of part 6 would be regionally adaptable. These include criteria for ordained and licensed ministry, specialized lay ministry, organization and judicial administration.

The regionalization legislation also would mandate a study to update and perfect the new regional conference structure, including examining whether the U.S. should continue to have jurisdictions. Eliminating jurisdictions would require another large number of constitutional amendments and other changes to the Discipline.

Regionalization would allow each region to set qualifications for clergy. It also would allow each region to determine what it considers chargeable offenses under church law. Any regional conference policy would need to be in line with the laws of the country or countries within its borders.

For regionalization to be approved, it must be approved by 2/3rd vote of 862 delegates and a 2/3 aggregate vote of annual conference delegates. If approved Holston will be voting on it at our Holston Annual Conference in 2025.

2. Revised Social Principles

a. What are the Social Principles? How did we get them?

In 1908, the Methodist Episcopal Church North was the first denomination to adopt a social creed to deal with the unfair treatment of factory workers. It was an 11 point public statement that addressed issues such as the end of child labor (which at that time children could work beginning at age 4), creating a fair wage, one day off per week and safety standards. Within a decade, the ME Church South, Methodist Protestant Church adopted a social creed. The Evangelical United Brethren Church develop a social creed in 1946. In 1972, the United Methodist Church (only 4 years old) developed their own social principles.

b. The formation of the Revised Social Principles

Every four years, individual Social Principles are added, amended and updated. 2020 is the first time since 1972 that the Social Principles document has been reviewed and edited as a whole. The proposed changes are more than eight years in coming. The 2012 General Conference referred legislation from the denomination's three central conferences in Europe to revise the Social Principles.

The United Methodist Board of Church and Society will bring legislation for a full revision of the Social Principles. The goal is for the statements that guide United Methodist public witness to be more succinct, more theologically grounded and more globally relevant.

Church and Society held listening sessions around the globe to learn from United Methodists what they thought of the social teachings and how they might be improved. Six international writing teams, assigned to the six sections of the Social Principles, worked on an original draft, which Church and Society then made available to the church for comment. The version submitted reflects the work of both the writing teams and the international feedback received.

c. The Purpose of The Social Principles

The preface to the Social Principles states, “The Social Principles are not church law. Instead, they represent the prayerful and earnest efforts of the General Conference to speak to issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation that is in keeping with the best of our United Methodist traditions.

The Social Principles are thus a call to faithfulness and to social engagement and intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit. Moreover, they challenge all members of The United Methodist Church to engage in deliberative reflection and encourage intentional dialogue between faith and practice. (See ¶ 509.)

You can access the revised social principles online at [Revised Social Principles Link](https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/124) (<https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/124>)

d. How are the Social Principles organized and what do they address?

In the 2016 Book of Discipline, there are six sections: the natural world, the nurturing community, the social community, the economic community, the political community, and the world community.

The subjects addressed in the social principles include climate stewardship, food safety, marriage, divorce, human sexuality, abortion, suicide, rights of racial and ethnic persons, rights of immigrants, alcohol and drugs, media, health care, work, poverty, gambling, church and state relations, education, the death penalty, war and peace, and justice, just to name a few.

In the Revised Social Principles, they have reduced it to four sections: Community of All Creation, The Economic Community, The Social Community, and the Political Community. Regarding human sexuality, the revised social principles do not include language on homosexuality as incompatible with Christian teaching. They do include language less specific and more overarching themes on God’s purpose for sexuality. The revised social principles will be up for debate, amendment, and approval at General Conference.

There are petitions seeking to remove the language of incompatibility of Christian teaching regarding homosexuality that was added to the Book of Discipline in 1972. There are other petitions relating to human sexuality seeking to strengthen prohibitions seeking ministry. There are a handful of petitions to extend Paragraph 2553, so that it can continue

to apply in the U.S. and expand to churches in the central conferences. Another petition set forth a process for churches that seek to reaffiliate with The United Methodist Church.

Other Issues at General Conference

a. Budget

Even before General Conference's postponement, the General Council on Finance and Administration had planned for a significantly lower denominational budget than what the 2016 General Conference passed. The finance board is proposing the lowest denominational budget in 40 years. Both the finance agency board and Connectional Table jointly approved the budget allocations.

The 2025-2028 denominational budget of about \$346.7 million marks a nearly 43% overall reduction [from the \\$604 million denomination-wide budget that General Conference approved at its last regular meeting in 2016](#) — and represents the biggest budget drop in the denomination's history. The proposal requires significant cuts to all funds that support denomination ministries which include UMC bishops and general agencies.

b. Adding African bishops

The budget proposal coming before delegates reduces the number of U.S. bishops to 32 from the 46 included in the previous budget approved in 2016. The denomination's shrinking financial base also has affected longtime plans to add more bishops in Africa. The 2016 General Conference authorized the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters to work with African church leaders to develop a comprehensive plan for the addition of five bishops on the continent. Initially, the standing committee submitted legislation to the 2020 General Conference for adding those African bishops, increasing the total from 13 to 18. The standing committee also proposed increasing the number of central conferences in Africa from three to four with adjusted boundaries.

But in the wake of the denomination's dramatically changed financial situation, the standing committee has continued to pay attention to the trends and listen to African leaders to discern next steps. When the standing committee meets immediately before General Conference in April, the committee plans to finalize a recommendation to bring before delegates.

The Standing Committee's proposal will also include a recommendation on the number and boundaries of the central conferences on the African continent. The current three African central conferences are Africa, Congo and West Africa. Each includes multiple countries and languages.

c. A United Methodist Understanding of Church

While some petitions deal with the parting of ways, a theological statement coming before delegates emphasizes what United Methodists hold in common. ["Sent in Love: A United Methodist Understanding of Church,"](#) is the work of the Committee on Faith and Order, an international group of United Methodist scholars and other church leaders chosen by the

Council of Bishops who work on theological matters between General Conference sessions.

“Sent in Love” is intended to be placed alongside statements previously adopted by General Conference on the sacraments: [“By Water and the Spirit”](#) on baptism, and [“This Holy Mystery”](#) on communion. “Sent in Love” affirms the United Methodist conviction that “the saving love of God 1) empowers a missional community; 2) is meant for all people, not just for a favored few; 3) is transformative; 4) and creates community.”

d. Changes to U.S. clergy benefits

Wespath, the denomination’s pensions and benefits agency, is also adjusting to the denomination’s new financial realities. The self-supporting agency has submitted legislation to move active U.S. clergy from a plan that combines both defined-benefit and defined-contribution components to the Compass plan that is entirely based on defined contribution.

Under the legislation, the Clergy Retirement Security Program — the current pension program — would be closed to new accruals on Dec. 31, 2025, said Andrew Hendren, Wespath’s top executive.

e. Closer ties with Episcopalians

The Council of Bishops has submitted the proposal for a full-communion agreement between United Methodists and Episcopalians. The two denominations have been in talks since 2002, but their shared history goes back much longer. Both have ties to John Wesley’s Church of England.

To be clear, full communion is not a merger where denominations become one, like when The United Methodist Church formed in 1968. Rather, full communion means each church acknowledges the other as a partner in the Christian faith, recognizes the validity of each other’s baptism and Eucharist, and commits to work together in ministry. Such an agreement also means Episcopalians and United Methodists can share clergy. The United Methodist Church already has full-communion agreements with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Uniting Church in Sweden, five historically Black Pan-Methodist denominations and the Moravian Church in North America.

Holston Conference Resolution

In 2022, Holston Conference trustees issued the a resolution for churches considering their next steps. The most pertinent parts are included here:

WHEREAS, if the 2020 General Conference had been held in 2020 or even in 2022 as the date to which it was first postponed, congregations would have been allowed time after the 2020 General Conference to understand fully any disciplinary changes and to discern whether to disaffiliate based on proposed legislation adopted by the 2020 General Conference; and

WHEREAS, Since the 2020 General Conference was postponed and General Conference will not convene until after ¶2553's sunset provision of December 31, 2023, discerning congregations face the burden of a deadline without the benefit of additional insight into legislation that may be adopted by the General Conference in 2024 concerning the future direction of The United Methodist Church or possible additional legislative pathways for separation of local churches; and

WHEREAS, the Holston Conference trustees empathize with congregations who feel rushed to make a decision by the known process described in ¶2553 rather than risking that legislation adopted by the 2024 General Conference might be less gracious;

NOW, THEREFORE, the Holston Conference resolves that if there are changes made at the 2024 General Conference related to human sexuality that cause our local churches to believe it is untenable to continue as United Methodist churches, the Holston Conference and its trustees commit – within the parameters of the Book of Discipline - to seek a gracious, fair and non-punitive separation process for such local churches at least through December 31, 2024;

IT IS FURTHER RESOLVED that the Holston Conference resolves to continue working to advance legislation that provides such a gracious, fair and non-punitive separation process to be considered at the next session of the General Conference and to work collaboratively with other annual conferences to build consensus concerning proposed legislation that would fulfill the aspirations of this Resolution.

Therefore, once General Conference is complete, we will give an update on Sunday May 5 at 3pm and identify next steps. Thanks for your prayers and your patience.

What Can You Do?

1. Pray
2. Stay Informed
 - [UMnews.org](https://www.umnews.org)
 - [resourceumc.org](https://www.resourceumc.org)
 - Daily Christian Advocate - Daily Briefings from General Conference
 - [Holston.org](https://www.holston.org)
 - [Print Guide to General Conference - https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2024/03/25/15/32/gc_conferenceguide2024_eng_v2c.pdf](https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2024/03/25/15/32/gc_conferenceguide2024_eng_v2c.pdf)