

From the desk of Bishop Fairley

Today at this very moment I write these words while on mission work with the Extended Cabinet and lay people from across our Annual Conference at Stoney Fork UMC in Stoney Fork, Ky., being here reminds me of how important our connection is.

I would wager that the people on our team come from diverse backgrounds, both theological and political. We are here because the risen Lord compels us to be his hands and feet in the world. When we acknowledge that we are indeed the body of Christ, we discover unity in diversity. Whatever else might be said about General Conference – and much has been written and said: I imagine social media is flooded with narratives about what did or did not happen – this document gives you a clearer picture of what legislation was passed and what it means.

I ask each of you to clear your minds and hearts of whatever you have heard or read (I know that will be difficult) and share this information with your congregation and with one another. It is important that as we make life-altering decisions, we use the best information we have. Therefore, I share this with the people called United Methodists in Kentucky that it might help us navigate what lies ahead.

The United Methodist Church

United Methodists are people of God who, across the connection, share a common mission and values.

The United Methodist Church transcends geography, borders, barriers, and differences.

Founded on a Wesleyan theology of grace, we are people of faith who experience and extend the love and grace of God as we serve our neighbors near and far.

United Methodists are anchored in Scripture and committed to a discipleship that is grounded in the love, teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

The United Methodist Church is a diverse worldwide church serving all people, where everyone belongs and can be fully included and regarded as God's beloved.

As John Wesley said,
*"Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?
May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?
Without all doubt, we may."*

We are moving forward with renewed hope and a focus on mission and ministry as we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We proudly claim that we are a people with open hearts, open minds, and open doors.

Regionalization

Regionalization aims to structure our denomination more to reflect the growth and ministry of our global church and give The United Methodist Church's different geographic regions equal standing in decision-making.

Under Regionalization, the seven existing central conferences in Africa, Europe and the Philippines will be reorganized into "regions." The entire United States will also be designated a "region."

All regions will be required to adhere to the core parts of The United Methodist Church Book of Discipline outlining our church mission, doctrinal standards and essentials of our faith. (Parts I - V: Constitution, General Book of Discipline, Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task, The Ministry of All Christians, and Social Principles). The General Conference is the only body given authority to change or adapt these.

Regional Conferences would have the authority to adapt the parts of the Book of Discipline focused on organization and administration so that items related to their context and missional realities can be decided at a more local level.

The United Methodist Church's constitution currently gives central conferences authority to adapt portions of the Discipline to fit their missional needs, but the United States currently lacks this authority. Therefore, all U.S.-related legislation requires the approval of the General Conference.

Regionalization would allow the U.S. Regional Conference to handle US-centric items that don't impact other parts of our worldwide church but take up much of the General Conference's time, like clergy pension plans. This would enhance the General Conference's efficiency and missional focus.

Regionalization stands as distinct from the other work of General Conference. It had been in development for many years, with the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters and the Connectional Table collaborating on the petitions that were submitted. It received support from delegates from every region.

Much of the regionalization legislation passed by the General Conference — including creating a U.S. regional conference — is contingent upon ratifying constitutional amendments.

The regionalization legislation amends the constitution of the UMC and, therefore, must pass a two-step process to become church law.

- The first step has been completed. The constitutional amendments, which must receive a two-thirds majority vote at the General Conference, surpassed this threshold, securing 78% approval of the whole body of the General Conference. (Delegates approved the amendments 586 to 164).
- Now Ordained clergy and lay members of every Annual Conference in the world must now vote on the amendments. To be ratified, it must receive a two-thirds majority approval from an aggregate total of all votes cast. In other words, all the votes cast in all Annual Conferences will be tallied as one vote and the amendments must receive an approval of two-thirds.

Annual Conferences will vote on the amendments in 2024 and 2025. Kentucky will vote on the constitutional amendments at its 2025 Annual Conference session. The Council of Bishops likely will announce the vote results late in 2025.

Learn more:

www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-regionalization-series

Read the legislation:

www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2023/10/23/17/33/worldwide-regionalization-petitions-english.pdf

Changing Language about Human Sexuality

The 2024 General Conference neutralized language about weddings and ordination by removing sections in The Book of Discipline that prohibit persons in same-gender relationships from being ordained and same-gender weddings from taking place in our churches or being officiated by United Methodist clergy. This takes us back to pre-1972 language in The Book of Discipline.

The conference additionally added protective language, ensuring no clergy can be compelled to perform or prohibited from performing any marriage.

Bishop Leonard Fairley Note:

Although we may not be on the same page or of the same mind around the changes in our Book of Discipline these changes make it possible for us to hold our convictions and still find a place at the table. These changes do not erase the pain that people across the theological spectrum and our LGBTQ brothers and sisters have experienced in our 50+ years of conflict. However, it provides space in The United Methodist Church for persons with differing experiences and theological convictions to stand. Pray that in the paraphrased words of John Wesley, 'While we might not all think alike might we all love alike.'

Some specific actions by the General Conference:

- Removed ¶ 304.3. which said: *While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.*
- Add new subparagraphs after ¶ 340.2 regarding Responsibilities and Duties of Elders and Licensed Pastors saying *No clergy at any time may be required to provide for or compelled to perform, or prohibited from performing any marriage, union or blessing. All clergy have the right to exercise and preserve their conscience when requested to perform any marriage, union, or blessing.*
- Added new subparagraphs after ¶ 419.12: Specific Responsibilities of District Superintendents *13. The superintendent shall not penalize any clergy for performing, or refraining from performing, a same-sex marriage service. 14. The superintendent shall neither require any local church to hold or prohibit a local church from holding a same-sex marriage service on property owned by a local church.*

- Added new subparagraphs after ¶ 416.7 regarding Specific Responsibilities of Bishops
8. The bishop shall not penalize any clergy for performing, or refraining from performing, a same-sex marriage service. 9. The bishop shall neither require any local church to hold or prohibit a local church from holding a same-sex marriage service on property owned by a local church.
- Eliminated parts of the Traditional Plan passed by a vote of 438-384 at the 2019 General Conference. That language added in 2019 aimed at strengthening the denomination's longtime restrictions on same-sex marriage and "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy.
- Removed a ban on annual conferences and denominational agencies from giving United Methodist funds to any "gay caucus group" or using funds to "promote the acceptance of homosexuality." Instead, the provision now says annual conferences and agencies should honor the denomination's commitment not to reject lesbian or gay members.
- Eliminated the requirement that the General Council on Finance and Administration, the denomination's finance agency, enforce the ban. Instead, the provision says the agency should ensure that church funds do not go to anything that rejects LGBTQ people or limits the response to the HIV epidemic.
- Removed the ban on boards of ordained ministry from even considering candidates without evaluating whether they are "self-avowed practicing" gay people and struck the requirement that bishops rule gay candidates ineligible.
- Erased the mandatory penalty of at least a one-year suspension without pay for clergy found guilty of officiating at same-sex weddings or unions. This was the denomination's only chargeable offense with a mandatory penalty.
- Allow gay clergy in good standing to be appointed across annual conference lines when their bishop can't locate an appointment in their conference.
- Set a moratorium on judicial proceedings related to the denomination's bans against "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy and same-sex weddings. The moratorium will last until General Conference alters it.
- Eliminated the 52-year-old assertion in the denomination's Social Principles that "the practice of homosexuality... is incompatible with Christian teaching."

- Edited ¶ 304.2 regarding Qualifications for Ordination. The subparagraph now says: *For the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the most effective witness to the Christian gospel, and in consideration of the influence of an ordained minister on the lives of other persons both within and outside the Church, the Church expects those who seek ordination to make a complete dedication of themselves to the highest ideals of the Christian life. To this end, they agree to exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity, integrity in all personal relationships, social responsibility, and faithful sexual intimacy expressed through fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, mutual consent, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.*
- Edited ¶ 2702.1 Regarding Chargeable Offenses for Clergy. The first offense for clergy was edited to say *(a) immorality*. This aligns with the list of chargeable offenses for laity later in this paragraph.
- Eliminated ¶ 341.6 that banned ministers from conducting or local churches from hosting same-gender weddings.

What does this mean to the Kentucky Conference?

- Pastors will have the right to choose what weddings to perform.
 - Local church Boards of Trustees will have the right to determine which weddings to host.
 - Persons are not prohibited from ordination due to being in a same-gender relationship.
 - The Conference Board of Ordained Ministries and District Committees on Ministry will continue to have authority to recruit, examine, confirm the calling of and discern the qualifications of those to be credentialed into licensed and ordained ministry.
 - The Bishop and Cabinet will continue to use careful and prayerful consultation in the appointment process, with the goal of clergy/church matches that result in effective ministry.
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Revised Social Principles

The United Methodist Church passed Revised Social Principles through six pieces of legislation - five of which were approved on consent calendars. (A consent calendar is a group of petitions approved without floor discussion because they received ten or fewer votes against them in the legislative committee.)

The Revised Social Principles, developed over eight years with contributions from over 4,000 global members, remove references to homosexuality, reflecting a significant shift from previous teachings since 1972.

Revised Social Principles aim to make the denomination's social teachings more globally relevant and concise.

The preface of the newly adopted Revised Social Principles explains,

"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."

Delegates only amended one paragraph of the proposed Social Principles during floor discussion. It speaks to marriage. The amended paragraph says: *Marriage: Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith (adult man and woman of consenting age; or two adult persons of consenting age) into union with one another and into deeper relationship with God and the religious community.*

History of Social Principles

- In 1908, the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) adopted an 11-point Social Creed, primarily focused on workers' rights, the first such statement by any denomination.
- The Methodist Protestant Church (1916) and the M.E. Church South (1914) followed suit in the next decade, and the EUB created a statement of social beliefs in 1946.
- When the United Methodist Church was formed in 1968, the previous social creeds of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist churches were included in the first Discipline.
- General Conference adopted the first Social Principles of the United Methodist Church in 1972.

"The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection." John Wesley

Read the Revised Social Principles:

www.umcjustice.org/documents/124.

Talking Points from the General Board of Church and Society discussing the creation of the Revised Social Principles:

www.umcjustice.org/documents/224

Wespath Compass Plan

A new retirement plan for United Methodist clergy in the U.S. has won approval overwhelmingly at the General Conference. Delegates approved the plan by a vote of 658 in favor and 64 opposed.

The plan, Compass, was conceived and championed by Wespath, the denomination's pension and benefits agency, as a sustainable approach to supporting retired clergy.

With Compass, clergy will have retirement accounts that they control. They are encouraged to contribute at least 4% of their salary to receive a full matching contribution from the church. All eligible U.S. clergy, regardless of their church's size, will get at least a \$150 monthly contribution plus 3% of pay for their account balance — and beyond that, will get another dollar-for-dollar match on up to 4% of pay.

Compass also will provide matching contributions to help clergy pay off student loans.

Wespath has for years offered the Clergy Retirement Security Program, which combines defined-benefit and defined-contribution components. That program will be frozen at the end of 2025, with Compass taking effect on Jan. 1, 2026. Clergy will retain CRSP benefits earned through the end of 2025 and then begin earning benefits through Compass. The plan does not affect the benefits of clergy who have already retired or benefits earned in CRSP prior to 1/1/2026.

The Kentucky Conference will work with Wespath to offer educational opportunities for clergy to learn more about the new Compass plan. Additionally, we anticipate the new Compass plan will reduce the amounts churches are currently billed for retirement benefits.

More information:

www.wespath.org/about-wespath/general-conference/Compass-Retirement-Plan

Bishops

General Conference passed four of the five petitions the Jurisdictional Study Committee recommended, eliminating the current formula for calculating bishops. These four petitions:

- Eliminated the formula for calculating bishops in each jurisdiction;
- Established a minimum number of bishops (five) for each jurisdiction;
- Established a process for jurisdictions to request any additional bishops needed, which means those jurisdictions who believe they need more than five bishops can discern the number they need;
- Established that if a jurisdiction wants more than five bishops, the jurisdiction, not the denomination, will pay for those additional bishop costs; and
- Authorized the Interjurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy to receive and act on any requests from jurisdictions for additional bishops.

The General Conference voted by 645 to 96 to add two African bishops, increasing the number of African bishops from 13 to 15. They further approved adjusting the boundaries of the three central conferences on the African continent, so there will be four central conferences starting in 2025.

The Interjurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy recommended a Bishop distribution in the United States. Following retirements at the end of August, there will be 32 active bishops in the U.S., a reduction from the current 37 active bishops. This recommendation also notes that no new Bishops will be elected at Jurisdictional Conferences in July. The committee was required to provide a minimum of 5 bishops to each jurisdiction.

Beginning Sept. 1, 2024, the number of residential Bishops in each jurisdiction will be

- Southeastern Jurisdiction 9
- Northeast Jurisdiction 6
- North Central Jurisdiction 6
- South Central Jurisdiction 6
- Western Jurisdiction 5

This distribution means three current bishops would be transferred to a different jurisdiction. Specifically, this means two bishops would transfer to the Western Jurisdiction, and one bishop would transfer to the Northeastern Jurisdiction.

General Church Budget

During General Conference, delegates voted to reduce a key component of calculating apportionments — the portion of local church giving requested to fund the general-church budget. They passed the new base rate for The United Methodist Church's apportionment formula. Conferences will shift from their current base rate of 3.29% to a base rate of 2.6% for 2025 and 2026. Then, if the apportionment collection rate is 90% or higher in those years, the base rate will jump to 2.9% for 2027 and 2028.

On the last day of legislation, General Conference passed a quadrennial general church budget that takes into account two scenarios—a 2.6 percent base rate for apportionment calculations and one that starts at 2.6 and jumps to 2.9 percent if collections reach 90 percent.

- The budget at the 2.6 percent base rate is \$353.6 million.
- The budget at the 2.6 percent and the 2.9 percent base rate is \$373.4 million.

The total budget comprises seven different funds: the World Service Fund, Ministerial Education Fund, Black College Fund, Africa University Fund, Episcopal Fund, General Administration Fund and Interdenominational Cooperation Fund.

Each annual conference has the authority to decide its own formula for apportioning funds to local churches within its boundary. Kentucky uses a tithe model, where local churches give 10% of their unrestricted receipts.

Reaffiliation of Churches

General Conference delegates approved legislation requiring each annual conference to develop a readmission policy for Disaffiliated Churches to The United Methodist Church. The vote was 629 to 96.

The new paragraph to be added to the Book of Discipline says: *With a spirit of grace, we welcome those churches which have disaffiliated or withdrawn to rejoin The United Methodist Church. Where applicable, every annual conferences shall have a policy of reaffiliation for the churches seeking to return to the connection. Each such policy shall require that reaffiliating churches affirm their commitment to the Trust Clause in ¶2503.*

Ended Disaffiliation

By a vote of 516 to 203, General Conference delegates supported the removal of Paragraph 2553, which expired on Dec. 31, 2023. This action ended a disaffiliation policy that the special 2019 General Conference added. In Kentucky, conference leadership is aware of this decision and is examining how this impacts our conference.

Sacramental Authority of Deacons

Legislation granting sacramental authority to deacons in their ministry setting was approved by a vote of 448-240 (a 65% majority).

The legislation authorizes Deacons to preside at the sacraments—Holy Communion and baptisms—in their appointments without needing explicit permission from their bishop.

¶ 328 in the Book of Discipline will now say: *The Ministry of a Deacon – From among the baptized, deacons are called by God to a lifetime of servant leadership, authorized by the Church, and ordained by a bishop. From the earliest days of the church, deacons were called and set apart for the ministry of Love, Justice, and Service and for connecting the church with the most needy, neglected, and marginalized among the children of God. This ministry grows out of the Wesleyan passion for social holiness and ministry among the poor. It is the deacons, in both person and function, whose distinctive ministry is to embody, articulate, and lead the whole people of God in its servant ministry. Deacons fulfill servant ministry in the world and lead the Church in relating the gathered life of Christians to their ministries in the world, interrelating worship in the gathered community with service to God in the world. Deacons give leadership in the Church's life: in teaching and proclaiming the Word; in contributing to worship, in assisting the elders in administering the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, or in presiding at the celebration of the sacraments when contextually appropriate and duly authorized; in forming and nurturing disciples; in conducting marriages and burying the dead; in embodying the church's mission to the world; and in leading congregations in interpreting the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. For the sake of extending the mission and ministry of the church and offering the means of grace to the world, the offering means of grace to the world, the deacon is authorized to preside at the celebration of the sacraments. Presiding at the celebration of the sacraments involves taking responsibility to lead the gathered community in celebrating baptism and Holy Communion. As members of the Order of Deacons, all deacons are in covenant with all other deacons in the annual conference and shall participate in the life of their order.*

Full Communion with Episcopal Church

General Conference approved full communion with the Episcopal Church. The agreement needs the approval of the Episcopalians before going into effect.

If the Episcopalian Church affirms the agreement, which might not happen until meetings scheduled for 2027, it will mean that the two denominations recognize each other as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in which the Gospel is rightly preached and taught."

Communion would also mean that we would recognize the authenticity of each other's baptism and Eucharist; extend sacramental hospitality to one another's members; recognize ordination of each other's priests, elders and deacons; report regularly to one another; formulate joint educational materials and encourage continuing education opportunities for lay and clergy leaders regarding full communion; and agree to cultivate and maintain active partnership and consultation with each other.
