



# What is the Future of the United Methodist Church?

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AN INFORMATIONAL UPDATE ON RECENT AND UPCOMING ACTIONS  
NORTH OLMSTED UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
NOVEMBER 2019

# Why are we here?

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- The United Methodist Church is at a crossroads regarding its official position on human sexuality.
- Significant decisions regarding the future structure and organization of the church may occur in 2020. Those decisions may have profound impacts on:
  - Local churches and the communities they serve
  - Pastors and their families
  - Agencies and affiliates of the UMC
  - People of the UMC, especially our LGBTQ friends and their allies
- Forming a new structure will have major theological, legal, financial, and interpersonal consequences. The global UMC is an enormous organization; major changes to it will be expensive.
- Our objective today is to provide the NOUMC congregation a basic understanding of the issue, its current status, and an overview of certain activities currently in process, so we can begin to prepare for an uncertain future.

# History

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- In the late 1960s and early 1970s, interest in and awareness of LGBTQ issues (“gay rights” back then) was receiving significant attention in the media.
- The UMC responded in its 1972 General Conference by adopting new language in the *Book of Discipline* that (among other things):
  - Declared homosexuality to be “incompatible with Christian teaching”
  - Explicitly forbade the ordination of openly gay clergy
  - Created penalties for Pastors who officiated at ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions or same-sex weddings
- This language has been challenged at every General Conference since then (1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016), but has not changed and has remained controversial.
- In recent years, as same-sex relationships have become more accepted in society, these rules have been openly disobeyed by many UM clergy (usually with the support of their congregations), including the appointment of an openly gay Bishop.

# What is the issue?

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Ultimately, what divides us is a difference in interpretation of scripture. We fall roughly into two camps:

- Those who believe the Bible is inerrant and that its teaching on sexuality is clear.
  - “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.”
- Those who believe scripture is best interpreted in the context of the time and culture of those who wrote the separate books and letters from which the Bible was compiled.
  - This is especially true for passages from the Old Testament, which many believe are best viewed through the lens of Jesus’ later teaching on the primacy of love. That is, does the passage help us love people, or harm people?
  - The people of the UM Church have accepted such contextual interpretation of other social issues with similar clear depictions in scripture. A few examples:
    - Verses condoning slavery were the basis of the division of the church after the Civil War. They still impact race relations today.
    - Verses that marginalize women and say they should have no leadership role in the church.
    - Verses dealing with the exclusion of divorced individuals.
    - Verses in the Old Testament depicting gruesome violence attributed to God.

# 2019 Special General Conference



- In the 2016 General Conference, the *Commission on a Way Forward* was created in an attempt to settle this question. The *Commission* was charged with making recommendations that would be voted on in a special General Conference in 2019.
- At that General Conference (February 2019 in St. Louis), four plans were presented:
  - *The One Church Plan* – A centrist/progressive proposal that removed the controversial language from the *BofD* and would allow conferences, churches and pastors flexibility on matters of human sexuality.
  - *The Traditional Plan* – A conservative proposal that preserved and broadened the language in the *BofD*, and which strengthened and mandated the associated penalties.
  - *The Connectional Plan* – A proposal to replace the geographic conferences with others based on perspectives on sexuality (traditional, progressive, unified).
  - *The Simple Plan* – Simply removes the language from the *BofD* that excludes LGBTQ people from full participation in the church.
- By a small margin, the Traditional Plan was passed and will take effect on January 1, 2020.

# Where are we now?

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- Many people—traditionalists and progressives alike—in the UMC are dissatisfied with the outcome of the 2019 General Conference. The church remains divided on this issue, despite the passage of the Traditional Plan last year.
- Most people recognize that the current state of division is not sustainable. Further action is necessary.
- It is expected that additional legislation will be presented at the (regularly scheduled four-year) General Conference in Minneapolis in May of 2020. While there are many other matters to be decided at the 2020 General Conference, it is expected that issues of sexuality and its impact on the future of the denomination will again likely dominate the agenda.

# 2020 Plans

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Several plans are emerging for consideration at the 2020 General Conference. The following pages provide a short description of a few.

- The Indianapolis Plan
- UMC Next
- UM-Forward New Expressions
- Connectional Plan

Each of these plans require extensive alterations to the *BofD*, and will be reviewed in the fourteen legislative committees at the General Conference before voting. It is an enormously complex undertaking.

Due to the size and complexity of the worldwide United Methodist organization, any plan passed would require several years (and significant financial resources) to implement. This may require another special General Conference in 2023 or later for finalization.

# The Indianapolis Plan

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- Proposed by a group people with varying perspectives to support an amicable separation plan.
- Provide a pathway for the development of a Traditionalist UM Church and a Centrist UM Church (names are placeholders).
- The current UM church would not be dissolved but would continue as the legal entity of the Centrist Church. In the Centrist Church, annual conferences and local congregations would make their own decisions regarding appointments and same-sex ceremonies.
- A Progressive UM church may emerge or be included within the Centrist Church.
- Other denominations may emerge if 50 or more churches agree.
- New alignment could begin as early as August 1, 2020 on an interim basis.
- All local church property, assets and liabilities would continue to belong to that local church.
- Unfunded pension liabilities would be assigned to the new denominations. Congregations withdrawing from the denominations will make payment to the new denominations for unfunded pensions.
- Some agencies (UMCOR, UM Women, UM Men, Publishing, WesPath) would continue with independent directors, providing services to any denomination desiring those services. Other UM Boards would become part of the Centrist Church.

# UMC Next

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- Repeals the Traditional Plan
  - Includes a moratorium on all new and pending complaint proceedings related to the implementation of the 2019 Traditional Plan.
- Opens Opportunity to Form New Expressions of Methodism
  - Offers resources to new denominational expressions of Methodism
  - Creates a consistent process for local churches who desire to separate from The United Methodist Church to receive their property and continue to participate in pension plans.
- Allows Central Conferences to set their own policies without affecting United States conferences.

“In short, Next Generation UMC legislation removes barriers to ministry, positions our church to reach a new generation of people and ushers in Spirit-fueled new life for The United Methodist Church.”

# UM-Forward: New Expressions



- Gives birth to four new denominations as fresh expressions of the Wesleyan legacy (names are placeholders):
  - *Traditionalist* - grounded in preserving traditionalism and biblical inerrancy
  - *Moderate* - grounded in personal salvation, conversion, and missions
  - *Progressive* - grounded in the social gospel
  - *Liberation* - grounded in Gospel-centered, anti-colonial, and intersectional justice that intentionally empowers people of color and LGBTQ individuals.
- Dissolves the current United Methodist Church as a legal entity.
- Calls for a plan of separation to be presented at 2024 General Conference, with a transitional council to develop the plan, which attends to all practical, legal, and financial considerations related to such dissolution.
- Includes a moratorium on all new and pending complaint proceedings related to the implementation of the 2019 Traditional Plan.

# The Connectional Plan

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- This plan would replace the current jurisdictional conferences with three connectional conferences based on affinity: Progressive, Traditional and Unity. All three would use a general Book of Discipline (Articles of Religion, General Rules, Confessions of Faith) with the ability to adapt other portions to their context for ministry.
- Creates a United States Regional Conference, comprised of the current US jurisdictions.
- This creates a new mechanism for US jurisdictions to manage their own legislation without (what some perceive as) undue influence from other nations whose culture and laws are aligned differently.

# Who is involved?

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Several groups are actively advocating their positions ahead of the 2020 General Conference.

*Wesleyan Covenant Association* – Very large, well-organized tradition-centered organization. Driving force behind the Traditional Plan.

*Good News Magazine* – Evangelical UM publication advocating faithful and vibrant practice of orthodox Wesleyan Christianity. Helped author the Traditional Plan.

*Mainstream UMC* – Group of left- and right-leaning centrists dedicated to waking the “very wide middle” of the political spectrum in the UM Church. Advocates of the One Church Plan. Data and survey driven.

*Reconciling Ministries Network* – Long-time advocates for the inclusion of LGBTQ persons within the United Methodist Church. NOUMC is an RMN church.

*Methodist Foundation for Social Action* – Independent progressive network of UM clergy and laity working for social justice in a variety of areas (peace, poverty, race, people’s rights, etc.) since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*UM Forward* – Group formed before the 2019 General Conference to develop the scriptural and theological case for removing all forms of anti-gay discrimination in the UM Church.

*UMC Next* – Formed in the wake of the 2019 General Conference. Group of centrists/progressives working on the future the church. Leadership group includes several Bishops and pastors of some of the largest UM churches (including Adam Hamilton).

# So, what's next for NOUMC?

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- Honestly, we don't know yet. Much will happen in the coming months. Mostly we need to watch and see. We continue to monitor what's happening around the denomination.
- Pastor Hoyte and Andy Walsh attended the 2019 Church of the Resurrection *Leadership Institute* in Kansas City in September, where this matter was the sole subject for the conference of 2,500 people. That included a separate breakout session with pastors and laity from other East Ohio churches.
- Like most churches, we have members with varying perspectives on this issue, but we are thankful that NOUMC is a safe place to have this discussion. That isn't true in many churches.
- Andy has made connections with local representatives from RMN and UMC Next, and one East Ohio delegate to the 2020 General Conference. We hope to build on those relationships as things progress.
- Pastor Hoyte is working with the leaders of the RMN for NOUMC to host "An Open Table" service in 2020.
- We are considering some changes to the NOUMC committee structure to help ensure our leadership has the right organization and sufficient time to reflect on the changes coming, and to make informed decisions when the time comes. More to come on that later.

# Questions?

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