

What does this mean for the local church?

There is no change to the current Book of Discipline related to same-sex marriage or the ordination of qualified, self-avowed homosexual persons. The past practice of not allowing same-sex marriage continues. New provisions enhance enforcements of these policies for pastors and bishops and define the penalties for those who disobey. Please see attached sheet for information related to each legislative petition that was passed by the 2019 General Conference.

Legislation providing a path for churches who desire to exit the denomination was passed. If churches desire to disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church, this legislation provides a defined process with multiple steps that need to be fulfilled. This legislation, like other items passed at General Conference, will be reviewed on April 23, 2019 by the Judicial Council to determine constitutionality. If the Judicial Council determines this legislation to be unconstitutional, the current exit provisions of the Book of Discipline remain in effect. Those interested in disaffiliation would be prudent to wait for this ruling before beginning the process described in the petitions that were affirmed.

1. Will we as a local church have to vote on anything?

One of the greatest concerns laity and pastors expressed prior to General Conference was their desire to avoid a requirement to vote on any policy related to marriage or ordination. This concern was heard and respected by those who crafted plans considered in the plenary session of General Conference. None would have required such a vote.

The only legislation passed at General Conference that requires a congregation to vote is the petition related to disaffiliation of a congregation from the United Methodist Church.

2. How do we talk about this with our congregations?

Church members have been given information and impressions of the General Conference through the national news media, social media, and other forms of communication. It is important to provide your church members with accurate information and pastoral care. Accurate information prevents gossip, misinformation, and other forms of communication that damage the body of Christ. Lack of conversation about General Conference can also be wounding those who desire an opportunity to ask questions or share their responses to its outcomes. Pastors are expected to both lead and shepherd the congregation to which they have been appointed in an informed, loving and gracious fashion.

It is essential that pastors and lay leaders be a non-anxious presence if they are to care for their congregations at this time. In this spirit, it would be wise to avoid highly reactive social media posts that are either celebratory or condemning in nature. The scripture

calls us to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). It also calls us to speak the truth in love. The truth we speak will differ, according to our calling and biblical interpretation. However, we share a common understanding that we are to be a people of love, respect and honesty. Many opportunities will arise for conversation that will enable laity and clergy together to consider what it means to be the church, to love all people, and to be disciples of Jesus Christ at this time. This is an opportune time to walk closely with others, hear their grief and pain, or conversely, their affirmation of the decisions of the General Conference. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, this can be a time to deepen relationships, even as we may differ on the impact of the General Conference outcomes to ourselves and those we love.

Accurate information can be found on the websites of the Virginia Annual Conference and the United Methodist Church. These information channels will be free of the more reactive interpretive qualities offered by unofficial groups related to the United Methodist Church that may offend some in your congregation. By using official UMC information, pastors and lay leadership will experience less complaint by those who feel they are being unfair in their communication.

Intentional pastoral care should be offered in communication to the congregation by the pastor and lay leadership of the church as well as the time spent with church members in conversation and other acts of care. Since the outcome of General Conference was to both affirm and put more accountability measures around prohibitions related to same-sex marriage and ordination, it is likely that those most in need of care are those in the LGBTQ community, their family members, friends and allies. Pastors who hope to retain such persons in their church would be wise to consider the names of such persons and reach out to them in a proactive and compassionate fashion. Listening to others is a great act of care.

3. What is the next step for us if any?

The ruling of the Judicial Council, which meets on April 23, 2019, will provide greater clarity to the actions of General Conference. They will define the constitutionality of each petition that was passed. This is an essential step as we move into the future.

Bishop Lewis will speak about the impact of the General Conference decisions in a livestream meeting on Monday, March 4, 2019. Delegation leaders Martha Stokes and Tom Berlin will be present to answer questions about General Conference. Other opportunities for conversation will occur on various districts and at the session of the Virginia Annual Conference in June.

The General Conference continued the traditional practices of the United Methodist Church. Most pastors and churches will continue to focus on their mission, as they are doing in the current time. Some will also work for change in the United Methodist Church, to make it more inclusive and progressive in its practices, or conversely, to ensure accountability of current provisions related to ordination, marriage or related

matters. The General Conference continued the traditional practices of the United Methodist Church.

Official and unofficial groups related to the United Methodist Church will consider and post their reactions to General Conference and plans for the future through their communication channels. This information will assist those interested in how individuals, churches and conferences are planning for the future.

4. The delegation makeup has proven critical to the voting results in GC 2019. How will the US/international mix change in GC 2020 and 2024?

It is estimated that approximately one-third of General Conference delegates from the United States supported the Traditional plan. The vast majority of delegates from countries Africa and other conservative countries voted for the Traditional Plan. If the church continues to grow the global south, these delegations will gain more seats at General Conference.

In 2020:

African delegates increase by 26.

US delegates decrease by 24.

Virginia will retain 22 delegates.

Delegate tallies for 2024 will not be available until 2023.

5. How can our clergy be prepared and equipped to respond with a non-anxious presence?

Clergy should be informed with the facts related to the actions of General Conference. The normal spiritual disciplines clergy undertake daily will serve them well in the weeks ahead. Time for the Holy Spirit to calm their spirit, provide wisdom and calm, and help them discern appropriate responses to the General Conference will come through the spiritual practices common to Wesleyan Christians. This is a time to seek the “peace that passes all understanding” that can “guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippines 4:7) even if we are not at peace with the denomination at this time. Clergy who first process their own responses to the outcomes of General Conference with colleagues, counselors or their District Superintendent will be better equipped to consider their words and reactions to questions, affirmations or frustrations of their church members related to General Conference.

Clergy who desire to offer informational gatherings in their church can find resources including a PowerPoint presentation, video interviews and statements from our bishop from the websites of the Virginia Annual Conference and United Methodist Church

6. What do these decisions mean for General Conference 2020?

No General Conference decision binds a future General Conference. It is likely that many issues present at the 2016 and 2019 General Conferences will be considered again in 2020.

7. Can these decisions made at this General Conference be changed?

Any decision made at a past General Conference can be changed at a future General Conference. Most legislation requires a simple majority for change. Changes to the Constitution of the United Methodist Church require a two-thirds vote of General Conference delegates and an aggregate two-thirds vote of affirmation by all delegates of each Annual Conference across the global connection.

8. What will Virginia delegates be required to vote on at Annual Conference 2019?

No action of the 2019 General Conference will require a vote at the 2019 session of the Virginia Annual Conference.

9. Will the Bishop be speaking to the General Conference 2019 decisions?

The Bishop has shared a pastoral letter about the General Conference. You can find a copy of this letter on the website of the Virginia Annual Conference. Bishop Lewis will speak about the impact of the General Conference decisions in a livestream meeting on Monday, March 4, 2019 and at other events in the future including the annual session of the Virginia Annual Conference in June.

10. How do we address the issues surrounding the WCA?

The Wesley Covenant Association met in the days following General Conference. They plan to put out a statement of response to General Conference on their website sometime on Thursday, February 27, 2019.