

Gathered for Mission, Structured to Serve: A General Conference Primer

A General Conference 2019 Resource for Leaders Produced by United Methodist Communications

By David C. Teel

What is the General Conference of The United Methodist Church?

General Conference sets the rules and establishes procedures for virtually every aspect of the church's life. It also communicates the denomination's official position on a variety of issues and cultural challenges.

Every four years, United Methodists from around the world assemble and connect in worship, prayer, Communion, fellowship and the legislative work that shapes our shared life.

With "full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional" (*The Book of Discipline 2016 (BOD)*, ¶16, ¶501), General Conference delegates confer and vote on proposals for resourcing and regulating the life and work of The United Methodist Church.

Published each day of a General Conference session, *The Daily Christian Advocate (DCA)*, documents the decision-making process of the only body that "can speak officially" for the denomination (*BOD*, ¶509). The *Discipline* reflects the results of legislative decisions, while *The Book of Resolutions* carries statements and calls to action on many different topics. A new volume of each is published after each quadrennial General Conference.

The first precursor to today's United Methodist General Conference occurred in 1784 when all Methodist preachers in the United States gathered for the Christmas Conference, which formed the Methodist Episcopal Church. The first General Conference was in 1792. Attended only by clergy, it established the pattern of meeting once every four years. Today 600 to 1,000 lay and clergy delegates elected from every annual conference in Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States gather quadrennially to both reaffirm and revise the way we live our mission.

What does General Conference determine?

The Discipline (¶¶ 13-22; 501-511) outlines the powers and duties of General Conference. These include the authority to provide and define:

- The responsibilities and privileges of church membership (without reference to race, gender or status),
- the duties and powers of clergy, bishops and annual conferences,
- revisions of official hymnals, rituals and modes of worship,
- boards and agencies supporting the connection,
- fundraising and distribution of funds,
- a uniform basis for electing bishops in the jurisdictional conferences in the United States and the number of bishops in the central conferences on other continents,
- jurisdictional boundaries,
- judicial processes,
- the establishment of commissions and
- "such other legislation as may be necessary subject to the limitations and restrictions of the Constitution of the Church" (¶ 16).

General Conference cannot revoke clergy or church members' right to trial/due process, eliminate bishops or change the General Rules. Amending the Constitution requires the approval both two-thirds of the General Conference delegates and two-thirds of the annual conference members voting, while changes to the Articles of Religion or Confession of Faith require the approval of three-fourths of those voting in both bodies.

What is a special session of General Conference?

The Council of Bishops (all active and retired United Methodist bishops) or General Conference itself may call a special session of the assembly to deal with a specific issue facing the church, be that missional, bureaucratic, theological or cultural (*BOD* ¶14). The special session may only deal with the business defined in the call unless two-thirds or more of the delegates vote to consider other matters. Most of the delegates to a special session will have served in the previous General Conference.

The bishops have called a special session of General Conference for Feb. 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri, USA to address the unity of the church and the theological impasse related to human sexuality, specifically the church's ministry with, by and for LGBTQ individuals. Delegates will receive the report of the Commission on the Way Forward, which the 2016 General Conference authorized. Pending a review by the Judicial Council — the denomination's highest court — for constitutionality, three plans (submitted as petitions to change the *Discipline*) will be presented in the report. The delegates, acting as a single legislative committee, will then discuss and discern which proposal they want to refine. The Judicial Council's rulings are expected in late October. Delegates will also consider other petitions considered in harmony with the Council of Bishops' call for the special session. This is only the second special session since the creation of The United Methodist Church in 1968. The first one in 1970 dealt with the organization of the new denomination.

Who attends General Conference?

Delegates to General Conference are equal numbers of laity and clergy elected by their annual conferences, missionary conferences or other approved autonomous or concordat churches with which The United Methodist Church has a special relationship. For example, the Methodist Church in Great Britain sends four voting delegates to each General Conference. Each annual conference has at least one clergy and one lay delegate. The total number of delegates is between 1,000 and 600. General Conference 2016 had 864 as will the special session.

A formula determines the number of delegates each annual conference elects. The current formula calls for one clergy delegate per 375 active/retired clergy members of the conference, one clergy delegate for every 26,000 local church members and lay delegates equal to the total of clergy delegates. (*BOD* ¶ 511) Around half of the delegates at any General Conference served previously. All delegates participate in plenary sessions. Each also serves on a legislative committee. Most conferences also elect alternate delegates who participate in General Conference as needed to assure that each annual conference is fully represented throughout the session.

Bishops preside over General Conference but have neither vote nor voice in the sessions and may address the assembly only with its permission.

Others who serve the General Conference process include a Secretary of General Conference (elected at the previous quadrennial gathering) and a Commission on the General Conference.

Others usually attending include staff and directors of the general agencies and advocacy caucuses.

Countless volunteers also attend to serve as pages and tellers, ushers, hosts and worship leaders and to fill many other roles.

Space permitting, anyone else who wishes to do so may attend General Conference, observe the legislative sessions and participate in worship and special events.

The secretary and the Commission on the General Conference — what do they do?

The General Conference secretary calculates the number of delegates to be elected from each annual conference. If the number is outside the 600-1,000 range, the Commission on the General Conference is authorized to adjust the total.

The secretary also works with 25 elected members of the Commission on the General Conference who select the site/venue, choose dates, establish the per diem reimbursement for delegates and make certain materials are available in the appropriate languages to allow all delegates to participate fully. To date all General Conferences have met in the United States — rotating among the five jurisdictions. The Commission on the General Conference is recommending that the assembly convene in the Philippines in 2024 and in Zimbabwe in 2028.

A petitions secretary receives, documents and edits petitions and resolutions and shares them online and in print in the *Daily Christian Advocate* (Advance, daily and final editions).

The Commission through its Committee on Agenda and Calendar develops the conference schedule and agenda and informs delegates of pertinent meetings and related documents. The secretary and commission together receive, document and edit petitions and resolutions and share them online and in print in the *Daily Christian Advocate* (Advance, daily and final editions). The secretary also provides the accurate, permanent record of General Conference, which is published by the United Methodist Publishing House and housed at the General Commission on Archives and History.

Who can petition General Conference?

Prior to each session, the secretary of General Conference or designated petitions secretary receives petitions from organizations, boards, commissions, congregations, caucuses and individual United Methodists. Any member of the church may submit a petition, which may be about anything related to the life and work of the church. Due at least 230 days before the opening session of General Conference, each petition can address only one paragraph of the *Discipline*. The person, group, agency or organization submitting a petition must sign it. Most petitions appear in the Advance edition of the *Daily Christian Advocate*, with any others provided to all delegates in print and digital formats. Petitions are sorted and grouped by subject matter or the part of the *Discipline* they address (missions, finance, local church, etc.) and assigned to legislative committees for initial debate, discussion, revision and vote. These committees make it possible to review thousands of petitions — something impossible for the full gathering of delegates. Committees may combine petitions if there is significant overlap.

How is General Conference conducted?

General Conference opens with worship and gathers for prayer and worship throughout the multi-day session. Following a roll call and establishing a quorum, the body adopts a Plan of Organization and Rules of Order. This sets the schedule, ground rules, duration and order for presenting General Conference business.

The quadrennial General Conferences usually last 11 days with delegates spending much of the first week reviewing petitions in legislative committees. The 2016 General Conference had 11 committees to which were

assigned 1,068 petitions. A legislative committee votes to adopt, reject or refer each petition it considers and sends its vote to the full General Conference. If an established percentage of a legislative committee supports the proposed legislation, the petition is placed on a consent calendar. By adopting the consent calendar, General Conference adopt the legislation without further debate. A small number of delegates can remove an item from the consent calendar and place it before the full General Conference for debate and a vote. If a sizeable minority of a legislative committee disagrees with the majority, it can present a “minority report” to the plenary session. If a simple majority of the delegates approve, the minority report becomes new proposed legislation. Additional votes may make it church law. The Judicial Council is in session throughout General Conference. At the request of the assembly, it sometimes reviews legislation either before or after delegates consider it.

All approved legislation becomes part of *The Book of Discipline*, which is available in print and online versions.

General Conference also adopts a quadrennial budget. The total amount is then apportioned to the annual conferences to fund global and connectional ministries of the denomination, including specific missional initiatives, the work of general agencies and bishops, interfaith and ecumenical work, support for seminaries and their students, historically black colleges, Africa University and General Conference.

Each General Conference also generates statements representing the official position of the United Methodist Church on a variety of contemporary issues and challenges. When approved by a simple majority of the delegates, these statements become part of *The Book of Resolutions*. Grouped under the same headings as the Social Principles in the *Discipline*, the resolutions express the official church position on everything from gambling and gun violence to health care and human cloning (view the [free online version of the 2016 Book of Resolutions](#)). While not binding on all United Methodists, they provide a thoughtful articulation and practical appropriation of Wesleyan faith for our time. As official statements from the only body authorized to speak for The United Methodist Church, they function as formal statements of United Methodist convictions and values to the broader cultural and political environment of the global church.

What are The Book of Discipline and The Book of Resolutions?

The Book of Discipline (BOD) outlines the law, doctrine, administration, organizational work and procedures of The United Methodist Church. Each General Conference amends *The Book of Discipline*, often referred to as *The Discipline*, to reflect its actions.

The Book of Resolutions contains both the resolutions and policy statements passed by the most recent General Conference and other such statements still considered to represent the official position of The United Methodist Church on that subject.

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To learn more about the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, check out these resources used in development of this primer:

- Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* Abingdon Press, 2006.
- Lacey C. Warner, *The Method of Our Mission: United Methodist Polity and Organization*, Abingdon Press, 2014.
- *Glossary*, www.umc.org.

Find other resources related to General Conference 2019 and the Commission on the Way Forward at www.umcom.org/gc2019 and www.umc.org/gc2019.