

Frequently Asked Questions Related to General Conference and Separation

The following questions have been submitted frequently either to district superintendents, to conference staff or via our questions@greatplainsumc.org email address. Information will be updated as new details are learned and as more questions arise.

1. **Why are we having this dispute over human sexuality now?**

The scriptural, doctrinal, experiential, and reasoned discernment regarding the marriage and ordination of same-gender persons started 50 years ago, during the 1972 General Conference, and has continued to evolve over the past half-century. Since then, language regarding all people being of sacred worth, sanctions, and chargeable offenses under church polity have been enacted to prohibit the marriage and ordination of self-avowed practicing gay persons.

In 2016, the General Conference appeared ready for a schism when delegates of the Great Plains Conference stood up and requested the bishops to get involved beyond merely presiding over the meeting. The result was the Bishop's Commission on a Way Forward, which provided three possibilities known as the One Church Plan, the Connectional Plan, and the Traditional Plan. (See [Commission on a Way Forward Report: What You Should Know](#))

Those options were presented at a special session of the General Conference in 2019 in St. Louis. The Traditional Plan — which enhances current policies in the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church about homosexuality and strengthens enforcement — was narrowly approved. Many clergy, laity, congregations, and UMC institutions lamented and resisted the outcome, and multiple annual conferences passed resolutions seeking to bypass the General Conference's decision.

In response to the growing unrest, a group of people representing traditional, progressive, and centrist views began meeting and developed the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation, an agreement that would give U.S. churches and conferences leeway on same-sex marriage and ordination of self-avowed and practicing gay clergy. It also would allow traditional-leaning congregations and pastors to leave the denomination — with the church property and assets — for another denomination.

A conservative group of clergy, laity, and congregations within the United Methodist Church announced it will launch May 1, 2022, as the new Global Methodist Church.

2. **Why is the church struggling with the marriage and ordination of gay persons even as our society has shown steadily growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ persons?**

Church doctrines (teachings) do not change easily. Sometimes they change at a painstakingly slow pace. For example, the Church's teaching on the age of the earth and the creation of the universe in six literal 24-hour days has changed over millennia. There are now numerous permissible interpretations. Some Christians today still hold to a literal six-day week creation belief. Another interpretation is informed by the "day-age" Hebrew understanding for day (*yom*) which can represent long periods of time — even billions of years like modern science talks about. And yet another interpretation is the "framework" interpretation that conveys the sequencing of life-giving formations over billions of years.

Today's Church is comprised of faithful Christians that hold a broad spectrum of viewpoints on LGBTQ+ issues and who seek to discern Christian truth in ever-changing contexts considering Scripture as the primary source, the Church's historical teachings, human experience, and reason based on emerging human knowledge. To have these discerning discussions about human sexuality is a sign of our Christian faithfulness and quest as United Methodists for a vital and appropriate Christian witness.

3. **If we were able to have a global Olympic event, why can't the UMC organize a General Conference? What are the reasons why this won't happen until 2024?**

Put simply, the Olympics and other events don't have to handle legislation and floor debate. The General Conference is, at its most basic level, a large-scale multi-national business meeting with more than 850 delegates comprised of people who cross more than a dozen time zones on four continents.

For all elected delegates to have an opportunity to participate fully, translation has to be conducted in real-time, as is done when the meeting is conducted in person. If the meeting were to be conducted online, such as using Zoom or other videoconferencing software, participants would have to allow for delays — most likely lengthy ones — as speakers' words are translated into English, French, Korean, Russian, German, Portuguese, and Tagalog. Allowances also would have to be made for slower internet speeds in some countries. Then, there is the reality of a complete lack of internet capabilities in some areas. For example, some delegates from the African continent would have to cross into the territory of warring tribes to participate, putting their lives in danger — a serious social justice concern.

Add in pandemic-related travel restrictions and limitations on travel visas either allowing persons into the United States or to exit the delegates' home countries, as well as the war in Ukraine (the same United Methodist bishop serves churches in both Ukraine and Russia), and it's perhaps a little easier to understand why a General Conference has been postponed to the next regularly scheduled year, which is 2024.

4. **Is the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation still a possibility? What were the key parts of the protocol that would allow for continued ministry if it is passed?**

The protocol is still a possibility. In simple terms, The Protocol allows for the possibility of ordination of LGBTQ+ persons and for same-gender weddings to be performed by UMC pastors away from or on UMC properties. It also would allow churches and pastors who simply cannot in good conscience participate in such matters to leave with their church property and assets in accordance with the provisions set forth in ¶12553 of the BOD. A significant amount of money — up to \$25 million — would transfer from The United Methodist Church to the Global Methodist Church to help it start with a good financial foundation.

The Protocol, at this point, is still a resolution that has yet to be debated by the General Conference. That governing body may support it, defeat it, or change it in many ways before a vote even comes up on the floor of the conference.

Most U.S.-based annual conferences have been living under the spirit of the Protocol since it was introduced prior to the pandemic and the expected General Conference in 2020. Dynamics have changed somewhat since then, with some churches leaving the UMC and, thus, no longer having a vote by delegates from their former annual conferences. Elections for delegates could play a major role in what transpires at the 2024 General Conference and if the Protocol or something similar will be given the support it needs to pass.

5. **I have heard the Protocol is no longer an option. If this is so, how are we still moving forward in the spirit of the protocol? Does this still mean there is a moratorium on church trials around the issue of human sexuality?**

As one expression of reconciliation and grace through separation, bishops and annual conferences have agreed that all administrative or judicial processes addressing restrictions in the Book of Discipline related to self-avowed practicing homosexuals or same-sex weddings shall be held in abeyance as of Jan. 1, 2020, through the adjournment of the first conference of the post-separation United Methodist Church. Clergy shall continue to remain in good standing while such complaints are held in abeyance.

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6. **What is the Global Methodist Church? And what does it mean that it will start May 1?**

The Global Methodist Church is a new evangelical denomination born out of the work of traditional-leaning church leaders regarding the scriptural interpretation and doctrinal standards. Wesleyan in its theology, the new church is expected to start operations May 1, 2022, meaning churches may begin joining the denomination at that time.

7. **If my church wants to disaffiliate, what is the process we must follow?**

The pastor or a lay member of church leadership should contact your district superintendent to schedule an informative session to discuss the process and its requirements. If the church leadership chooses to proceed with disaffiliation, the DS will call a special church conference within 120 days of the request. If at least two-thirds of the professing members present vote to disaffiliate, the church will then complete the remaining steps to disaffiliate with conference staff as directed by the Great Plains Conference Board of Trustees.

These steps include: 1) payment of past and future mission shares and the church's pro rata share of any unfunded pension liabilities, 2) removal of all United Methodist cross and flame insignia from the building, and 3) signing of a legal agreement and memorandum of fact between the church trustees and the conference.

8. **If a church disaffiliates, do we get to keep our church building and assets?**

Yes, when a church disaffiliates, the Great Plains Conference releases any and all claims on all property and assets owned by the church. These include land and buildings, cash and investments, as well as furnishings or other personal property purchased by, or donated to, the congregation.

9. **Can our church wait and see what happens at the next General Conference before we decide on disaffiliation?**

No. The next General Conference is expected to be held in 2024, however the provisions in the Book of Discipline that outline the disaffiliation process expire December 31, 2023, (§12553.2). It is possible these provisions could be reinstated by delegates at the 2024 General Conference, but there is no guarantee that will indeed occur.

10. **Once we vote to disaffiliate and the Annual Conference concurs, can we join the Global Methodist Church? And what is the process?**

Churches that want to join the Global Methodist Church may follow the procedures lined out by that denomination at <https://globalmethodist.org/the-process-for-congregations-to-join-the-global-methodist-church/>.

11. Will we still have access to the Great Plains resources if we disaffiliate?

While most information posted to the Great Plains Conference website and social media channels are open to all people, most resources — from grants to Zoom licenses to workshops — are available only to Great Plains Conference-member churches. Appointments of licensed and ordained UMC clergy to disaffiliated churches would no longer be available.

12. When we disaffiliate, how will my church find a pastor, once the one we have leaves or retires?

The Global Methodist Church appears to be planning an itinerant system, but full details of how that will work are still being determined. In fairness, the new denomination's leaders may not know yet exactly what the itinerancy will look like until it knows how many churches will join and what their needs for pastoral supply will be.

13. What happens to my pastoral status (CLM, Local Pastor, Provisional Elder/Deacon, Full Elder/Deacon when I leave the UMC?

Judicial Council Decision No. 696 in 1993 ruled that there is no disciplinary provision authorizing an ordained United Methodist pastor to hold membership simultaneously in another denomination. Upon joining another denomination, membership in The United Methodist Church is terminated — meaning appointments are terminated, pastoral licenses are terminated, conference membership is withdrawn, and ordination credentials are surrendered to the bishop.

People interested in ordination in the Global Methodist Church should research the procedures set forth in its “Next Steps for a Clergy person to Join the Global Methodist Church” document at <https://globalmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Next-Steps-for-Clergypersons.pdf>.

Clergy interested in joining another denomination should research that denomination's procedures prior to leaving The United Methodist Church.

14. If we are joining the Global Methodist Church and they are planning to be part of Wespath why do we still need to pay an unfunded pension amount?

Wespath is working with GMC leaders to negotiate if and how they will operate together. These discussions are still ongoing as of this version of our FAQ document, so please check back later for updated information. That said, pensions are a covenant made with pastors who have served churches in Kansas and Nebraska over the years. And it is each church's responsibility to fulfill their part of that covenant. The formula used to determine each church's pension liability takes into account many factors, all aimed at ensuring pastors are cared for financially in their retirement years.

15. I thought the Great Plains conference had at one time said the pension was fully funded. Why do we now have an unfunded Pension amount?

For management purposes, Wespath and the Great Plains Conference normally utilize a “funded basis” for calculating pension liabilities, and all three of our pension plans are currently funded at 120% or greater of their liabilities. This funded basis assumes that should the conference ever find itself in a position where these plans were no longer adequately funded (most likely due to

market volatility), we could go back to the local churches and request additional support to ensure these liabilities are fully funded.

When a church disaffiliates, the Great Plains Conference can no longer ask for additional support to ensure adequate funding for these pension obligations. So, a different approach to calculating these liabilities, the “market basis,” is utilized instead. The market basis assumes no future contributions can be made and, therefore, plans must have sufficient funding to ensure all obligations can be met even in the event of a major downturn in financial markets. This approach is similar to what is required by secular plans that are sponsored by multiple employers, when one of the employers elects to leave and ceases supporting, the plan.

16. Could you please explain what “unfunded pension” means, who sets it, why it is important, and how it is figured?

An unfunded pension liability means the projected payments to retirees via their pensions exceed funds already on hand. Wespath works hard to make accurate estimates using industry-accepted formulas. Wespath then works with annual conferences to ensure those obligations are met. This partnership is important because of the covenant made with pastors during their years of ministry that they will be provided for in retirement.

17. Why are we responsible for an additional year of Mission Shares if we are leaving the denomination?

The conference and its member churches work together to fulfill our united mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. As an annual conference, budgets are determined each year, and multi-year objectives for such ministries as New Church Development and justice-related ministries are launched with the entire process over those years in mind. The requirement for payment of mission shares ensures that objectives agreed upon by the annual conference aren't put in immediate jeopardy by the departures of churches.

18. Will we elect new bishops this year? And if so, when and where will that happen? And will people departing the denomination get to vote, meaning they will get to influence the election of a denomination to which they no longer belong?

The denomination's Judicial Council has been asked by the Council of Bishops to rule on whether Jurisdictional Conferences, the body that elects new bishops, can be conducted this year because of the General Conference postponement (the Book of Discipline calls for jurisdictional conferences to proceed 45 days upon adjournment of the General Conference). As of this version of the FAQ document, the South Central Jurisdictional Conference is scheduled for Nov. 2-5, 2022, with the location yet to be determined. Delegates elected to the 2020 General and Jurisdictional Conferences who remain members of the Great Plains Conference will be the representatives for our annual conference.

19. Will the disaffiliations mean we will need to redraw annual conference lines and, perhaps, group states together again, as we did with Kansas and Nebraska?

That is a possibility. If annual conferences need to be realigned, the jurisdictional boundary committee would recommend the realigned conference boundaries and names to the 2024 General Conference, which would approve the recommendations. As an example, it is possible that the five annual conferences across the state of Texas may be realigned into fewer conferences with a larger land area for each of them. Other states could be grouped together, as Kansas and Nebraska were in 2014, but it's far too early to know if that will be necessary.

20. **Where can we go to get accurate information about what is happening? Examples: “beumc.org” and conversation with Bishop Bickerton & Tom Berlin.**

The Great Plains Conference communications team will do its best to curate content as it becomes available and will post it to our website and social media channels. More frequent updates are being posted to the Great Plains’ General Conference page on www.greatplainsumc.org. However, United Methodists in Kansas and Nebraska are encouraged to look to other sources as well, such as United Methodist News Service, the ResourceUMC website, and websites for The United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church.

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