

Listening Sessions with Bishop Swanson

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about General Conference 2019

This frequently asked questions (FAQs) document was created with the goal of bringing clarity to several subjects that were asked about online and during the recent six listening sessions. The listening sessions were about the Called Session of General Conference that will take place February 23-26, 2019. The two paragraphs of *The 2016 Book of Discipline* that will be discussed at the Called Session of General Conference are:

- ¶ 304.3: 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.
- ¶ 341.6: Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.

Following the conclusion of the 2019 Called Session of the General Conference, Bishop Swanson will have 11 district gatherings from March 10-23, 2019. We received over 500 questions, comments and concerns, and no question/comment went unread. Every member of the Mississippi Conference Delegation received all your questions and comments whether they were submitted via index card or online through registration. Several questions were geared towards the delegation, so if you do not see the answer to your question here, you can find contact information for the [delegation here](#). Responses to your questions were broken down into the below five categories:

Judicial Council and Process/Procedure

There were over 65 questions on the subject matter of the Judicial Council and the process and procedures of the 2019 Called Session of General Conference. The Judicial Council is the highest judicial body or "court" of The United Methodist Church. Its nine members are elected by the General Conference.

The Judicial Council heard and responded to the 2016 election and consecration of Bishop Karen Oliveto in 2017 in which they referred the issue back to [the Western Jurisdiction](#) with specific directions. We are currently in the midst of that process which has yet to be completed by the due process of our United Methodist church law.

1. Who makes up the Judicial Council and what do they do?

The Judicial Council determines the constitutionality of acts or proposed acts of the General, jurisdictional, central and annual conferences. It acts on these either on appeal of lower rulings or through requests for declaratory decisions. It also rules on whether acts of other official bodies of the denomination conform to [*The Book of Discipline*](#). This is done in accordance with procedures established in [*The Book of Discipline*](#). To view the members of the Judicial Council, view their dockets and learn more [click here](#).

2. Where can I find the Constitution of The United Methodist Church? The Constitution can be found in [*The 2016 Book of Discipline*](#) beginning on page 25 and concluding on page 44. The Constitution establishes the basic outline for the organization of the denomination as well as establishing the office and role of the bishop. The Constitution establishes the Judicial Council as the body to rule on matters of church law as passed by the General Conference.

3. What's the status of the petition to maintain the current language in *The Book of Discipline* on homosexuality that was submitted to the 2018 Session of the Mississippi Annual Conference?

At 2018 Session of the Mississippi Annual Conference, the majority of the members voted to refer the petition to the delegation for their prayerful consideration. Since the delegation is going to the 2019 Called Session of General Conference and they represent the Mississippi Conference, the petition was viewed as expressed concern from some of the people the delegation is being sent to represent.

4. Can the results from the Called Session of General Conference in 2019 be changed by the 2020 General Conference? Yes. A future General Conference could change anything done in the 2019 General Conference by a simple majority—50 percent of the delegates plus one, unless the change is a constitutional amendment. Whether it is to change something or change it back, the constitutional amendment process—once it begins—will take approximately three years to finish and would require a two-thirds majority from the General Conference delegates as well as a combined two-thirds majority from all the clergy and lay members of all U.S. annual conferences and central conferences.

5. What if no petition gains a majority and how many votes are needed to adopt a petition?

If no one gets a majority—if nothing passes—we then continue under the *2016 Book of Discipline* with the current language intact.

A piece of legislation that is not requesting a change to the constitution only requires a simple majority—50 percent of the delegates plus one. In order to adopt a constitutional amendment, there must be a two-thirds majority from the General Conference delegates as well as a combined two thirds majority from all the clergy and lay members of all U.S. annual conferences and central conferences.

Plans to be presented at the 2019 Called Session of General Conference

There were almost 50 questions submitted related to the plans to be discussed during the 2019 General Conference. The Commission on a Way Forward has submitted 48 petitions. Seventy-nine additional petitions were submitted, of which 18 have been found to be invalid due to errors in formatting or failure to meet other requirements. The 61 remaining petitions are still being reviewed to determine validity in formatting. These determinations will all be reviewed by the Committee on Reference, in accordance with the Plan of Organization and Rules of Order of the General Conference.

1. What are the three plans the Commission on a Way Forward recommended to the Council of Bishops?

The three plans discussed in the final report from the Commission on a Way Forward are the One Church Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan and the Traditionalist Plan. A video describing in detail these three plans is being prepared and will be available in the near future.

2. What do the three plans entail and who makes up the Commission on A Way Forward? How were they selected?

You can read the history of the Commission on a Way Forward, [the members and moderators of the commission](#), the missional and theological framework and the details of each plan [here](#) in their official report.

Property, Pensions, Mission Shares and Clergy Benefits

We received over 30 questions pertaining to property, pensions, mission shares and clergy benefits that basically had the same four concerns expressed in the questions listed below:

1. What happens to church property if a church leaves the conference/The United Methodist Church?

Currently, Paragraph 2503 of *The 2016 Book of Discipline* explains that the real and personal property of a local United Methodist church is held in trust for United Methodism by the trust clause. The only exception is when property given to a congregation has a reverter clause, that allows the real property to revert to the original donor.

Under *The 2016 Book of Discipline*, only individual members may leave The United Methodist Church. When a large number of members declare a desire to leave The United Methodist Church, the superintendent follows a review of the demographics of the area and the wishes of those wanting to remain United Methodist as explained in paragraph 213 of *The 2016 Book of Discipline*. The buildings and locations committee make a determination of the best use or closure of the United Methodist church. Upon a recommendation of a superintendent to the cabinet, a decision is made based on the facts to either continue the church in its present location or close the United Methodist church. In the event closure occurs, the real and personal property becomes assets solely under the control of the conference trustees. The trustees review the value of the real and personal property, any endowments that have been given to the closed church and the related liabilities of the church.

Once the best disposition method of the assets is determined, the trustees move forward on the plan. Every location and every set of assets and liabilities are different. The trustees are charged by *The 2016 Book of Discipline* to make a prudent decision over property for the benefit of the Mississippi Conference and United Methodism.

2. What do the three plans recommended by the Commission on a Way Forward say about a “gracious exit?”

Only the traditional plan provides a method of gracious exit. We have not seen any other legislation that provides this option. The 2019 Called Session of General Conference will decide what will be followed as to real and personal property.

3. How do each of the three plans affect clergy pension?

Clergy pension design is governed by the General Conference. Wespath—formerly the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits—is charged by the General Conference to administer the plan. The local Conference Board of Pension has the responsibility of local administration of the plan which includes enrolling clergy, providing for the funding of the plan and following the rules as determined by a General Conference in regard to the United States pension plan. The best description of the plan and its affects can be found on [Wespath's website](#). The pension plan of lay employees is the responsibility of the local church and each plan can be different. While most plans are through Wespath, there are some churches that provide plans through other avenues.

4. How has the denominational impasse on matters of human sexuality affected Mississippi Conference mission shares?

Mission shares are our way of sharing the cost of doing the ministry God has called us to do as a conference. As of August 31, 2018, the collection rate is at 49.51 percent, compared to August 31, 2017 rate of 50.60 percent. When you look at an 18-year history, you will find that the 2018 collection rate is higher than every other year since 2007 which was in the middle of the Hurricane Katrina recovery and the beginning of a United States recession. This data does not reflect that churches are withholding funds. Churches are continuing to do the ministry God has called us to do connectionally as the Mississippi Conference. The Mississippi Conference Council on Finance and Administration is carefully monitoring the receipts and related spending to see that we remain true to our stewardship of God's assets for ministry of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Communications

Conference communications is committed to providing you with accurate updates, access to General Conference resources—such as how to watch General Conference on live stream, as well as scriptural resources like “[Navigating Tension Series](#)” and “[Praying Our Way Forward](#).”

1. Is there a special prayer team for praying the way forward?

Yes, and you are welcome to join it. Praying Our Way Forward is the prayer community for The United Methodist Church that is praying for God's leadership to guide us effectively in fulfilling the mission of the church. To see a brief video about this prayer community, find resources and a prayer schedule, [click here](#). All are invited to pray at 2:23-2:26 daily as these represent the dates of the General Conference. If those times don't meet your schedule, please choose another time to pray daily for the church and all the delegates who will be going to St. Louis.

2. What is the status of faith communities in the Mississippi Conference who have left The United Methodist Church?

To view the most up-to-date information on the members who have expressed the desire and pursued the process to leave The United Methodist Church here in the Mississippi Conference, [click here](#). We are committed to maintaining the unity of the church and regret when members choose to leave. Our hope is that we can navigate our differences to a place where we can love and serve with one another to be the church that Christ intends as we work together for the Kingdom of God.

We may be unable to share details in cases where faith communities pursuing leaving The United Methodist Church become legal matters.

3. What is the process that is used when members decide to leave the conferences?

The 213 process—as explained in paragraph 213 of [*The 2016 Book of Discipline*](#)—discerns and explores the potential viability for the ministry of a church.

4. When and how will results be released?

The 2019 Called Session of General Conference will be streamed live for the duration of the conference. There will be a news brief released everyday called *The Daily Christian Advocate*. News and updates will also be posted on the Mississippi Conference website and Facebook page – [The Mississippi United Methodist Conference](#).

Questions and Comments for Bishop Swanson and the Mississippi Conference Delegation

During the sessions of annual conference, there is an equal representation of clergy and laity members from your church or charge. Every four years, these clergy and lay members vote for delegates to represent the Mississippi Conference at General Conference. The responsibility of the delegation is to discern how God is leading them in ways to best serve the people they represent. Members of the Mississippi Conference delegation received a document with all of your questions and comments from the listening sessions and what you submitted online. There were over 320 questions and comments asked and made to Bishop Swanson and/or the delegation directly. If you have specific questions for the delegation, their information is on the conference website and you can [contact them here](#).

There were several questions and comments on Scripture and biblical interpretation. This General Conference was not called to debate whether or not homosexuality is a sin. It was called to address the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals and whether ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions can be conducted by United Methodist ministers and in United Methodist churches.

There were a lot of hypothetical questions and scenarios submitted that no one can respond to until we know the outcomes. However, we will begin to address those in the March district gatherings with Bishop Swanson and some members of the delegation that will take place shortly after the conclusion of the 2019 Called Session of General Conference.



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