

The One Church Plan: A Conversation within the Commission on a Way Forward

Summarized from the Final Report of the Commission on a Way Forward

A General Conference 2019 Resource from United Methodist Communications

Update: In early July, the Council of Bishops asked the Judicial Council, the top court in The United Methodist Church, [to rule on the constitutionality of the three plans](#) included in the report of the Commission on the Way Forward. In [Decision 1366](#) on Oct. 25, the Judicial Council unanimously found the One Church Plan to be largely constitutional and found some problems in the Traditional Plan petitions that would need to be addressed before that plan could pass a constitutional test. Since the Connectional Conference Plan contains proposed constitutional changes required for implementation, the court ruled it has no authority to scrutinize the plan at this time. [Read the full UMNS report on the Judicial Council's rulings.](#)

(#) refers to a page in the Report of the Commission on a Way Forward
All disciplinary references are to *The Book of Discipline 2016*.

Introduction to the One Church Plan

In July 2018, the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) [released its final report](#) to the Council of Bishops and the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. The [commission's work](#) seeks to serve and support the discernment of the Council of Bishops (COB) and the decision-making of a special session of the General Conference scheduled for Feb. 23-26, 2019.

The final report includes three plans, each offering The United Methodist Church a distinct way forward around issues of church unity and human sexuality: the **One Church Plan (OCP)**, the Connectional Conference Plan (CCP) and Traditional Plan (TP). A majority of the COWF and the COB recommend the OCP to General Conference as the preferred model for a way forward.

Summary of the One Church Plan

The OCP reflects the COWF's commitment to balance church unity with the demands of distinct ministry contexts and varying views of faithfulness. Remaining in relationship (unified effort and witness) while respecting different views is the goal of a plan that promises room to maximize witness *and* honor conscience, conviction and the contextuality of our shared global mission.

The OCP proposes an adaptable, "generous unity" without disbanding the "connectional nature" that makes global mission possible. It pledges the least disruption to United Methodist ministries, creating space for both traditionalists and progressives by providing space, freedom, flexibility and missional vitality through contextualized ministry. The OCP redefines marriage, removes restrictive language related to same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQI people *and* adds language protecting the religious freedom of pastors, bishops and conferences who as a matter of conscience do not support these practices. No one is required to "act contrary to their convictions."

For those who want change, it creates space for ministry without violating the *Discipline*. It also reinforces the existing freedom of:

- local churches to set wedding policies,

- pastors to decide whom to marry,
- and bishops and annual conference boards of ordained ministry and clergy sessions to discern, recommend and credential those called to and suited for ordained ministry.

Churches may choose but will not be required to host same-sex weddings. Pastors are neither required to nor prohibited from performing same-sex marriage, union or blessing ceremonies. Local congregations, conferences and pastors are not required to vote. It puts an end to the threat of church trials on charges related to ministry by, with and for LGBTQI people and maintains the current leadership structure of the church. General boards and agencies continue their service and work. Affiliated institutions can remain connected. Wespath would continue to provide pension services to clergy.

It also calls for jurisdictional conferences and episcopal areas in the United States to provide the financial support for bishops and their offices, while maintaining the current general church support of the episcopacy in central conferences. Any who cannot remain in connection may depart with grace following current *Book of Discipline* (BOD) processes.

Theological and Biblical Foundations of the One Church Plan

The OCP affirms that space for contextual ministry *and* a common mission are possible. Based on thoughtful readings of scripture (John 17:20-26, 1 Corinthians 12:26, Romans 14:19, Acts 5:38) and United Methodist history around the decision to ordain women, the OCP stresses that the current impasse over human sexuality need not divide the church. The OCP provides space for an empowering connection unified by world-transforming, disciple-driven mission *and* the flexibility to alleviate suffering and meet people on the margins. It also provides the freedom *and* assurances that pastors, congregations, bishops, annual conferences and the global ministry of the central conferences can honor conscience and the context of ministry.

Effects of the One Church Plan

Local churches do not have to vote or take positions on these issues and can continue current practices. They are free to rewrite policies that allow or prohibit same-sex weddings on church property per church conference approval. Churches may also express preferences about receiving appointed LGBTQI clergy through a covenant with their bishop. Bishops, district superintendents and cabinets may offer a collaborative process to help.

Annual conferences do not have to vote. Boards of ordained ministry or clergy sessions can add language to their standing rules to restrict or permit ordination of LGBTQI clergy in consultation with the bishop and cabinet.

Clergy have freedom of conscience and can include their convictions in their clergy profile to assist the bishop and cabinet in the appointment process. They are free to perform same-sex weddings where civil law permits. Clergy who cannot remain can leave The UMC with blessing and vested pension protected. Clergy transfer to another conference is supported. LGBTQI candidates in conferences not ordaining “self-avowed practicing homosexual persons” can request a transfer. Clergy trials related to LGBTQI ministry end.

Bishops may follow their conscience on ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexual people. They are protected if they cannot in good conscience ordain LGBTQI clergy candidates. Episcopal assignments in

the United States will continue to be made by the jurisdictional committees on episcopacy. Central conferences may create their own context-fitting guidelines for marriage and ordination through existing adaptable parts of *The BOD*.

Boards and agencies continue their work. **Related institutions** (camps, colleges and others) continue their affiliations or adapt based on *The BOD* and their own governing by-laws. Central conferences are not compelled to act contrary to their beliefs and the contextual needs of their distinct missional fields.

Disciplinary Changes of the One Church Plan

The OCP concludes with a list of changes to *The Book of Discipline* to be submitted as petitions with accompanying rationales (20-25). This amended and added language includes:

- **Adds** a paragraph to “Our Theological Task” (§105) naming honest differences around human sexuality and affirming those who read scripture differently regarding “homosexual relationships.” (20)
- **Changes** the Social Principles sections on “Marriage” (§161.C) and “Human Sexuality” (§161.G) to recognize marriage as “between two adults,” honor the traditional understanding of marriage, protect religious liberty (clergy not required to perform a same-sex union) and remove incompatibility language (“the practice of homosexuality ... incompatible with Christian teaching”). (20-21)
- **Changes** §304.3, “Qualifications for Ordination,” and **add a footnote to §310.2 f**, “Candidacy for Licensed and Ordained Ministry,” reflecting changes to the Social Principles and expanding the responsibilities of the conference Board of Ordained Ministry and clergy session to set ordination standards for human sexuality with candidates. (21)
- **Adds new sub-paragraphs** after §§329.3, 334.5 and 340.2 on the “Ministry, Authority, and Responsibilities of ... Deacons, Elders, and Licensed Pastors, protecting the religious liberty of clergy to exercise their conscience when asked to perform same-sex marriages. (22)
- **Changes** §341.6 on “Unauthorized Conduct” removing the prohibition of clergy performance of “homosexual unions” but requiring church conference approval and policies for performing same-sex marriages on church property. (23)
- **Changes to** §415.6 on “The Superintendency, Specific Responsibilities of Bishops,” protecting the religious liberty of bishops whose conviction/conscience prevent them from commissioning, licensing, and ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexual people. Jurisdictional colleges of bishops will provide for this with security of appointment continuing under the bishop of the annual conference. (23)
- **Adds new sub-paragraphs to §§416 and 419** on “*Specific Responsibilities of Bishops and District Superintendents*” preventing bishops and district superintendents from requiring or prohibiting the performance of same-sex marriage by pastors (or on church property), including the prohibition of any consequences of threat, coercion or retaliation by a district superintendent. (23)
- **Adds new sub-paragraph to §605** on “Annual Conference – Business of the Conference” providing for a vote by the Board of Ordained Ministry regarding certification, ordination and appointment of self-avowed practicing homosexual people and restricting subsequent motions on that issue for 30 months unless consented to by the presiding bishop. (24)
- **Changes** §2702.1 on “Chargeable Offenses,” removing restrictive language concerning “self-avowed practicing homosexual” and the performance of same-sex ceremonies from the list of chargeable clergy offenses (24)

- **Adds new sub-paragraph to ¶543.17** on “Central Conference Powers and Duties,” extending the post-General Conference time from 12 to 18 months for central conferences to adapt and translate new legislation. (24)
- Suggested **changes to ¶1504 and ¶1504.1**, reflecting unfunded pension liability requirements for churches leaving The United Methodist Church and pastor pension status following a termination of annual conference relationship. (25)

--This summary was developed from the report of the Commission on a Way Forward by David C. Teel, freelance writer and editor based in Nashville, Tennessee and former academic editor at Abingdon Press.