WPAUMC Way Forward Task Force
Final Report

Western PA Conference
The United Methodist Church

Presented to the General Conference 2019 WPAUMC Delegation
and
United Methodists of Western PA
Introduction

Our Task Force on “A Way Forward” was assembled by Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi. We have a nearly even balance of clergy and laity of different ages and diverse backgrounds. Most importantly, we hold theologically diverse opinions on A Way Forward proposals and the discussions heading to the Special General Conference 2019. While we are diverse in our positions, we worked to keep our opinions out of our work.

Our purpose was threefold: 1) to develop a process for allowing parishioners and clergy to express their thoughts, fears, hopes, and concerns about the three major plans that came from the Commission on the Way Forward meetings (One Church Plan, Connectional Conference Plan, Traditional Plan), 2) to ensure that the conversations are structured to facilitate hearing the thoughts of others in a safe and non-threatening environment, facilitating understanding rather than debating or persuading, and 3) To ensure the confidentiality of the participants who are providing feedback to the WPAUMC.

Essentially, we are a pulse check. With this as our mission, we developed a presentation and feedback process in our conference.

Members of the Task Force

Note: Task Force member names are listed without title. While Task Force members respect and appreciate titles and academic degrees, we most often addressed each other on a first name basis, practicing a convicted humility as we accomplished our work together.

Alyce Weaver Dunn
Sharon Gregory
Tom Hallman
Jacob Judy
Justin Judy
Hannah Loughman
Noah Manalo
Tracy Merrick
Renee Mikell
Ross Pryor

Shannon Shaffer
Denise-Nicole Stone
Richard Thomas
Roger White
Bob Zilhaver

Former member
Carol Hickman (Resigned due to Outside Circumstances)
The Process and Plan

Our plan, which was executed during the period of August 2018 to December 2018, was simple and straightforward. We conducted listening posts throughout the Conference, two in each of our 10 districts, as well as our original test Task Force. Listening Posts were conducted by moderators, members of our Task Force who presented summaries of each of the three main plans. Then we allowed for a time of focused discussion about each of the three plans separately by volunteer facilitators leading groups of about 8-10 people.

While our listening posts did not and could not realistically include every member of a United Methodist church in our Conference, many of the clergy and laity who attended did so to share what they felt the Holy Spirit was leading them to declare. Participants were respectful and articulate. They were ready to give feedback, willing to enter discussion, and did not shy away from asking questions.

A Way Forward Summary

The following notes are the summaries presented at the listening posts for each of the three major plans heading to General Conference 2019. These summaries were put together by three individuals on the Task Force, and appeared in a PowerPoint presentation format. They were presented in the order shown here, with 20 minutes of discussion about each plan after the summaries were presented.

One Church Plan

- Worked on by the Commission on a Way Forward and presented to the Council of Bishops.
- Council of Bishops is recommending this Plan
- No annual conferences, bishops, congregations, or pastors are compelled to act contrary to their convictions
- Maintains unity by stating “we are not of one mind regarding human sexuality”
- Affirms “those who continue to maintain that the scriptural witness does not condone the practice of homosexuality”
- Affirms “those who believe the witness of scripture calls us to reconsider the teaching of the church with respect to monogamous homosexual relationships.”
- In contexts where civil laws define marriage as a union between two adults, clergy and churches may, but are not compelled to, officiate and host same gender weddings.
- Deletes the disciplinary language “the United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teachings.”
- Deletes the requirement that ordained clergy not be self-avowed practicing homosexuals
- Allows each Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry and Clergy Session to determine how standards relating to human sexuality would apply to candidates for ordination
- States that ordained deacons and elders as well as licensed local pastors are not required to perform any marriage, union or blessing of same sex couples, nor are they prohibited from doing so
- The decision to perform a same sex wedding is strictly up to the individual clergyperson
- Plan provides that clergy who cannot continue to serve in their Annual Conference due to disagreements with their Conference standards may transfer to a different Annual Conference
- Provides that a clergyperson who cannot continue to serve a given local church due to disagreements over same sex marriage shall be assigned to a different church
- Forbids clergy from performing same-sex weddings on church property unless the church has approved such use
- Prohibits Bishops and District Superintendents from either requiring or prohibiting pastors from performing same sex weddings
- Deletes from chargeable offenses against clergy being a self-avowed practicing homosexual or performing a same sex wedding
- Requires any local church leaving the denomination to pay its unfunded pension liabilities, but it does not include any additional provisions for local churches to leave the denomination and keep their property; whether or not the local church can keep its property is still left up to each Bishop and each Annual Conference
- Provides that any clergy who leave the denomination would have their pension benefits converted from a defined benefit to a defined contribution plan; amount of future benefits is not guaranteed, but that the amount of benefits would depend upon how much money is in the person’s account at the time of retirement
- 18 Months Implementation Plan for the One Church Option
Questions for participants:
- What are your hopes, your concerns and your reflections about the One Church Plan?
- What does the One Church Plan accomplish for you?
- What might be the challenges of the One Church Plan for you?
- What other thoughts do you have about the One Church Plan?
Connectional Conference Plan

- The Connectional Conference Plan was worked on by the Commission on a Way Forward and was presented to the Council of Bishops.
- Annual conferences, bishops, congregations, and pastors will choose their Connectional Conference affiliation according to their convictions
- Allows the creation of connectional conferences based on theology rather than geography. The three options will be:
  o Traditional Connectional Conference
  o Unity Connectional Conference
  o Progressive Connectional Conference
- Traditional Connectional Conference in which marriage shall continue to be defined as between one man and one woman, same-sex weddings cannot be performed, and those practicing homosexuality cannot be ordained; a covenantal commitment to a more traditional understanding of the doctrinal and moral standards of the church with enhanced accountability.
- Unity Connectional Conference, which acknowledges that members are not of one mind regarding biblical interpretations related to human sexuality, in which pastors are allowed but not required to perform same sex weddings, annual conference are allowed but not required to ordain those practicing homosexuality, local churches are allowed but not required to receive an LGBT person as pastor, and in which no Bishop, pastor, or congregation is compelled to act against conscience in these matters.
- Progressive Connectional Conference, in which same-sex weddings are performed by all clergy, all annual conferences ordain qualified LGBT persons, and all local churches welcome LGBT pastors who match the needs of the congregation and its ministries.
- The current jurisdictions and central conferences would be equal in status and be called connectional conferences.
- The Connectional Conference determines the number of Bishops needed, elects Bishops, and funds their Bishops.
- No funding for a Bishop in the U.S. would come from a different Connectional Conference.
- The Connectional Conference determines the qualifications, powers, and duties of clergy including accountability through the complaint process.
- The Connectional Conference determines the qualifications, powers, and duties of Bishop, including accountability, through the Connectional Conference College of Bishops.
- The Connectional Conference has the power to adapt the Book of Discipline according to its theological perspective.
- Provides for a shortened General Conference mostly for celebration, sharing of best practices, and governing those parts of the church shared by all Connectional Conferences (General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits, Wespath; the Publishing House; General Council on Finance and Administration; United Methodist Committee on Relief)
- Four-Year Implementation Plan for the Connectional Conferences Option

**Traditional Plan**

- The Traditional Plan was initially worked on by the Commission on the Way Forward. It was completed by a small group of Bishops.
- Maintains the current stance of the church regarding the definition of marriage and the ministry of and with LGBT persons.
- Affirms that LGBT persons are welcome to attend worship services, participate in the programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows of membership become members of local churches.
- At the same time, the traditional plan acknowledges the deep conscientious objections on the part of some to the current stance and practices of the church. It accommodates those objections by fostering a gracious and respectful way for those persons who cannot live within the current boundaries of church practice to form or join self-governing bodies that allow them to follow their conscience.
- Such bodies could maintain an ongoing connection with the United Methodist Church through a concordat agreement (BOD para.574)
- Various changes are proposed to increase the accountability of Bishops and conferences for upholding and enforcing the Discipline of the church.
- Annual Conferences vote on abiding by the Discipline or joining a self-governing church body that gives them the freedom to perform same gender marriages and ordain self-avowed practicing LGBT persons.
- Annual Conferences and local churches that leave the United Methodist Church would be liable for pension liabilities but would be able to maintain their properties with no additional expenses.
- 22 months Implementation Plan for the Traditional option
Individual Survey Data

There were two main ways in which we collected data from our listening posts. The first was through individual surveys. This survey was given at the conclusion of our discussions, and participants responded to six questions:

1. If the One Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference, I will support it with my prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.
2. If the One Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference, my church will be committed to the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church's mission.
3. If the Connectional Conference Plan is adopted by the General Conference, I will support it with my prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.
4. If the Connectional Conference Plan is adopted by the General Conference, my church will be committed to the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church's mission.
5. If the Traditional Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference I would support it with my prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.
6. If the Traditional Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference, my church will be committed to the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church's mission.

Participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with these statements on a scale from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Some people did not respond to some of the questions. There were 1350 responses to these individual questions. Pie charts that represent this data are available in Appendix A, and all individual survey responses are available and anonymous in Appendix B.

**One Church Plan**

Based on these survey responses, we found the following: 24.2% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that they would support the One Church Plan, while 65.4% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would support the One Church Plan. 12.3% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that their church would support the One Church Plan, while 63.8% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed that their church would support the One Church Plan.

**Connectional Conference Plan**

Based on these survey responses, we found the following: 8.9% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that they would support the Connectional Conference Plan, while 73.9% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would support the Connectional Conference Plan. 10.6% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that their
church would support the Connectional Conference Plan, while 70.8% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed that their church would support the Connectional Conference Plan.

**Traditional Plan**

Based on these survey responses, we found the following: 65.5% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that they would support the Traditional Plan, while 20.7% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would support the Traditional Plan. 63.4% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that their church would support the Traditional Plan, while 17.0% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed that their church would support the Traditional Plan.

**Group Discussion Comments**

Our second source of data are the comments received from participants in group discussions. We received 1351 comments that were categorized as challenges, hopes, questions, reflections, or other. They were categorized by either the speaker, the facilitator, the data entry personnel, or some combination of the three.

For the One Church Plan, there were 350 comments (about 25.9%). Of those, 175 were challenge-type, 26 were hope-type, 62 were other-type, 23 were question-type, and 64 were reflection-type comments.

For the Connectional Conference Plan, there were 331 comments (about 24.5%). Of those comments, 138 were challenge-type, 24 were hope-type, 58 were other-type, 53 were question-type, and 58 were reflection-type comments.

For the Traditional Plan, there were 291 comments (about 21.5%). Of those comments, 40 were challenge-type, 115 were hope-type, 50 were other-type, 22 were question-type, and 64 were reflection-type comments.

There also were 379 comments (about 28.1%) categorized as General. Of those, 66 were challenge-type, 16 were hope-type, 192 were other-type, 11 were question-type, and 94 were reflection-type comments.

**Group Discussion Excerpts and Reflections**

In reading through the comments written down during the discussion portions of the listening posts, we saw several common threads and similar ideas.

For the **One Church Plan**, people who had hope for it felt mostly the same way as the majority of Bishops on the Council of Bishops. They were hopeful because, in their eyes, this plan allowed for people of all theological perspectives on the issue to live as United
Methodist together and in community. Those who had fears or concerns felt they could not live with this plan. It would be hard to define yourself as a “United Methodist,” in terms of perspectives of homosexuality in the church. You would have to preface which theological view your church holds. Some “big tent” churches might split because of this as well. Many felt they could not continue to be United Methodist under this plan; however, others felt they could.

For the **Connectional Conference Plan**, people who had hope for this plan felt it would allow us to remain united on the big and best parts, such as UMCOR. One comment said it would also get the WPAUMC out of the Northeast Jurisdiction with New York and Baltimore-Washington conferences. Those who had fears and concerns about this plan felt it was overall an administrative confusion. The travel costs, the expenses, the oversight of churches would be difficult to coordinate. They also felt, in a similar way, it would be difficult to describe yourself as a United Methodist. It would become a more loaded term. Some also felt this was a precursor to a church split into three United Methodist churches. Many felt they could not continue to be United Methodist under this plan; however, others felt they could.

For the **Traditional Plan**, people who had hope for this plan said it had the most support and foundation in Biblical authority, referencing scripture excerpts from Paul’s letters to the Romans and Corinthians. They said it would give greater confidence and accountability over the episcopal and pastoral leadership of the church. Those who had fears and concerns expressed that this will not allow them to reach the LGBT community. Some who might be described as traditionalists said they were not even satisfied with this plan. For example, some felt the inclusion into church membership was an affirmation of the sin that homosexuals were not seeking to repent. Many felt they could not continue to be United Methodist under this plan; however, others felt they could.

Overall, some were not satisfied with any of these three plans. None seemed to be able to support all three plans. There are a lot of fears and concerns, but there are still some hopes. All comments written down at the listening posts are available and anonymous in Appendix C.

**Interpretation**

This data does not necessarily reflect the views of the whole conference and should be interpreted with the understanding that these are the expressed views of those who desired to discuss and share in the Listening Post context. However, over 1300 United Methodists came to be part of the conversation around A Way Forward. Based on the Listening Post locations for which we have data available and interpreted, none of the three plans are overwhelmingly favored by United Methodists in Western Pennsylvania. The order of the plans from most supported to least is: Traditional Plan, One Church, Connectional Plan. The Traditional Plan, which was the most supported, had 65.5% of
participants responding Agree or Strongly Agree. While much is unclear, it is clear that our conference is divided on a way forward. There is also confusion in some of the interpretations of the plans. We did our best to clarify any questions that arose throughout the listening posts, but there were sometimes things we could not completely answer.

Use of This Information

This data is available to anyone through the Western PA Annual Conference website and will be made available to the Western PA delegation to the Special Called Session of the General Conference. Delegates will use it as part of their overall discernment process.

Future Directions

Because one of the goals was for us to come to a better understanding of our thoughts, fears, hopes and concerns, we will publish additional appendices and announcements as and if needed.

Appendix A

*Based of the responses of 20 Listening Posts + Trial Run = Totaling 1350 Responses

If the One Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference, I will support it with my prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.

WPAUMC Response Database

1 (Strongly Disagree): 765 Responses - 56.7%
3 (Neutral): 120 Responses - 8.9%
4 (Agree): 115 Responses - 8.5%
2 (Disagree): 117 Responses - 8.7%
5 (Strongly Agree): 212 Responses - 15.7%

Did Not Answer: 21 Responses - 1.6%
If the One Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference, my church will be committed to the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church’s mission.

WPAUMC Response Database

Did Not Answer: 71 Responses - 5.3%
5 (Strongly Agree): 94 Responses - 7.0%
4 (Agree): 111 Responses - 8.2%
3 (Neutral): 213 Responses - 15.8%
2 (Disagree): 159 Responses - 11.8%
1 (Strongly Disagree): 702 Responses - 52.0%

If the Connectional Conference Plan is adopted by the General Conference, I will support it with my prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.

WPAUMC Response Database

Did Not Answer: 39 Responses - 2.9%
5 (Strongly Agree): 81 Responses - 6.0%
4 (Agree): 76 Responses - 5.6%
3 (Neutral): 156 Responses - 11.6%
2 (Disagree): 166 Responses - 12.3%
1 (Strongly Disagree): 832 Responses - 61.6%
If the Connectional Conference Plan is adopted by the General Conference, my church will be committed to the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church mission.

WPAUMC Response Database

- Did Not Answer: 99 Responses - 7.3%
- 5 (Strongly Agree): 44 Responses - 3.3%
- 4 (Agree): 66 Responses - 4.9%
- 3 (Neutral): 185 Responses - 13.7%
- 2 (Disagree): 205 Responses - 15.2%
- 1 (Strongly Disagree): 751 Responses - 55.6%

If the Traditional Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference I would support it with my prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.

WPAUMC Response Database

- Did Not Answer: 26 Responses - 1.9%
- 5 (Strongly Agree): 676 Responses - 50.1%
- 4 (Agree): 208 Responses - 15.4%
- 3 (Neutral): 160 Responses - 11.9%
- 2 (Disagree): 77 Responses - 5.7%
- 1 (Strongly Disagree): 203 Responses - 15.0%

meta-chart.com
If the Traditional Church Plan is adopted by the General Conference, my church will be committed to the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church's mission.

WPAUMC Response Database

Appendix B

See Individual Survey Data

Appendix C

See Group Discussion Comments