

An Update from the General Conference of The United Methodist Church:

What Did and Did Not Happen

Dr. John Stephens

Chapelwood UMC – Houston, TX

May 6, 2024

Introduction

This document provides summarized and expanded options so you may choose what works best for you. At the beginning, the short digest is for those who just want the highlights. A longer, more detailed explanation follows with things that did and did not occur. At the end, we address disinformation that has already been sent by those who seek to do harm to the UMC and its membership.

The General Conference met April 23 - May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Some of the things that happened made the news, but most of the things that happened will probably never show up anywhere beyond UM News. Even if some news entities mean well, they don't do a good job going into the depth, rationale, or nuance of things that happen, especially when it comes to religion and church issues. They don't give the full context of who the delegates are, where they come from, and their differing views on some of the items we deal with. In addition, social media and blog posts from groups who are anti-UMC are extremely biased and intentionally misleading, including actual disinformation and lies about what occurred in the General Conference.

Before you make any assumptions about what did or didn't happen based on news or social media, I encourage you to read this document and visit with your local church leadership, your pastor, your District Superintendent, or your Bishop.

DIGEST – The Highlights

Regionalization

- Regionalization passed at the General Conference. It now requires a 2/3 majority vote from all the voting delegates to all annual conferences around the globe – US, Africa, Philippines, and Europe. This will not be final until 2025.

Revised Social Principles

- The Social Principles are not doctrine or theology of our UM church but are aspirational principles speaking to us about our ministry as we intersect with the

world around us. The revised Social Principles passed, and this was the first time we revised them altogether since 1972.

Removal of Restrictive and Condemning Language Around LGBTQ Persons

- The General Conference removed the restrictive ban on ordination of LGBTQ persons, while at the same time the Council of Bishops made clear they will not send LGBTQ clergy to churches who do not wish to receive them.
- The General Conference removed the restrictive ban that prohibited churches and pastors from performing a same-sex marriage service, while also adding protections for churches and pastors who have traditional views of marriage and choose not to host or officiate same-sex weddings.
- There was no language added that affirms same-sex marriage.

Financial Implications to Help the Local Church

- The 2025-2028 denominational budget was approved at \$353.6 million unless we collect 90% or more the first two years, in which case it will be \$373.4 million. This is a 41% decrease compared to the \$604 million budget from 2016. The number of US bishops was reduced from 46 to 32.

Other Items

- Encouraged creation care while not prohibiting investment in fossil fuels.
- Approved full communion with The Episcopal Church.
- Granted Ordained Deacons sacramental authority.
- Approved a new clergy retirement program.
- Approved the departure of four Eurasian annual conferences in Russia due to political and cultural concerns.
- Apologized for sexual misconduct in the UMC that was not handled appropriately.

DETAILED REPORT FROM GENERAL CONFERENCE

Regionalization

- There were 8 petitions around regionalizing the church. They were all passed at the General Conference (GC). Since they require changes to our Constitution, they required 2/3 majority vote at the GC and they will also need to receive 2/3 aggregate vote from all the voting delegates to annual conferences around the globe – the US, Africa, Philippines, and Europe. This takes time and may not be completed until late 2025.
- The idea of regionalization has long been a goal of the UMC. The history of our church is that we are a US denomination that started growing beyond the US, and now we have US-based churches outside the US. Our structure and business are very US-centric, and much of what we do and accomplish at General Conference has nothing to do with people in the Central Conferences (CC), which is what we call the conferences outside the US. This regionalization effort was led by current Central Conference delegates. There is broad support for this, as Central Conferences want the same rights and privileges as the US conferences.
- Regionalization will allow for new Regional Conferences (RCs – the new defined term for all geographical areas such as “The United States”, “The Philippines”, “Africa”, and “Europe”). Regionalization unites us together with a; 1) General Book of Discipline that contains our doctrine, theology, social principles, general rules, and restrictive rules – which cannot be changed and are shared across the global church. Our orthodox faith, the Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, historic creeds, etc., all remain shared together; and a 2) Regional Book of Discipline to give regional bodies the flexibility to adapt to culture, laws, and governments. Our global church is in different contexts with different ways of making disciples for Jesus – One church with both shared doctrinal beliefs and differing contextual allowances for ministries.

Revised Social Principles

- The first thing you need to know about the Social Principles is that they are not doctrine or theology of our UM church. It is an aspirational document meant to talk about our hopes for living into the world as God would have it. It speaks to the world as it is, in addition to how we long for it to be. The Social Principles do not speak FOR or on behalf of United Methodists, but rather they speak TO United Methodists. The Social Principles talk about a wide variety of things, including modern slavery, bribery, corporate corruption, adoption, abortion, creation care, and so much more.

These Principles, like our General Conference sessions, have often reflected US-centric issues while neglecting the diversity of the Central Conferences.

- The petitions related to the revision of the Social Principles passed overwhelmingly with support from all parts of the global UM church.
- **Marriage:** The one item that received the most attention is related to marriage. Remember, Social Principles are not doctrine, but aspiration to how we live in the real world as the people of God both recognizing context and calling us to highest ideals.
- The section now states, “*Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith, adult man and woman of consenting age or two adult persons of consenting age, into union with each other.*” The underlined amendment was added by Justice Molly Hlekani Mwayera who is a Supreme Court Justice of Zimbabwe. She astutely recognized that if the Social Principles are to speak across the globe, they had to speak to contexts where marriage is both culturally and legally different – whether it be Europe, Africa, or the US. Both definitions are true. But the importance of retaining “man and woman” is important to all areas of our church, whether in Africa or the US. This points to the reality we live in – which is what Social Principles do – while calling us to live the highest ideals of faith in each context. The section on human sexuality continues to affirm that sexuality is a gift from God and states that the UMC supports consent and adequate education.
 - The intent behind Justice Mwayera’s amendment was to bring the global church to a place of neutrality. Neutrality (or if you prefer, returning to the 1968 Book of Discipline’s way of addressing this - see below) allows the church to be unified in mission while continuing to be diverse in our understandings. You can be United Methodist with a traditional understanding of marriage. You can be United Methodist with a progressive understanding of marriage. But all United Methodists uphold, “faithful sexual intimacy expressed through fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.” (§304, newly added)
- Here we saw a global denomination dealing with one of the most controversial issues that exists, and we witnessed consensus on a way to move forward that maintains unity in mission.
- If you’d like dig deeper into the historical context of The United Methodist Church on the issue of marriage, take a look at what the Social Principles said about marriage in the 1968 Book of Discipline:

- *Marriage is an institution of divine appointment, upon the proper establishment of which are conditioned human happiness and well-being and the maintenance of the most important factor of civilization-the Christian home. Virtue and morality in society, stability and permanence of free government can be had only as the Christian home is maintained in its integrity. In view of the gravity of the interests involved in marriage, the Church admonishes all young people as follows:*
 - *To cherish only worthy and ennobling thoughts on the subject of courtship and marriage.*
 - *To avoid undue haste, and practice intelligent deliberation in every step pertaining to this matter.*
 - *To enter into marriage only after a favorable personal acquaintanceship sufficient to insure compatibility and the blessings of a Christian home, and to do so only when it can be "in the Lord" (I Cor. 7:39) and thus avoid being "mismatched with unbelievers" (II Cor. 6:14) in life's most intimate relationship.*
- In 1972, the Social Principles were amended to add that “*marriage was between one man and one woman and that the practice of homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching.*” Through the years, more restrictive amendments were added.
- The desire of the global church is to return to a neutral position, a 1968 edition of Social Principles, so that the gospel of Jesus can be proclaimed fully in differing contexts.
- **Abortion:** The UMC did not change our position on abortion. It is important to read the entire statement which is long and includes the following...
 - “Our commitment to the sanctity of human life makes us reluctant to condone abortion.”
 - “We unconditionally reject abortion as a means of birth control or gender selection.”
 - “We support measures requiring parental notification.”
 - “We oppose late term abortion and partial birth abortion. We call for an end to this except when the life of the mother is in danger.”
 - “We recognize the tragic conflicts of life may lead to decisions on abortion.” (Rape, incest, etc.)
 - “We support and encourage pastors, congregations, campus ministries to offer compassionate care and explore alternatives to abortion.” (Adoption, etc.)

- “We support use of reproductive strategies...including fertility treatments, in vitro fertilization IVF, surrogacy, and others.”
- The revised Social Principles are clear and communicate our concern for the sanctity of life while also recognizing there are exceptions. We also encourage exploring alternatives to abortion such as adoption.

Removal of Restrictive and Condemning Language Around LGBTQ Persons

- The General Conference removed the ban on the ordination of LGBTQ persons. The standard of determining fitness for ordained ministry is moved to the local level: to local churches, local districts, and conference Boards of Ordained Ministry. The local church can send a candidate forth, and the conference will determine giftedness, fitness, and call. This would not go into effect in an annual conference until the conference’s board of ordained ministry adjusts its policy.
 - The Council of Bishops has been clear: the Bishops and Cabinet have no desire to send any clergy into situations where they will be unwelcome or harmed. That is not good for the larger UMC, the local church, or the clergyperson. Context is important. The Bishop appoints clergy that would be a fit for the mission field.
- The General Conference removed the restrictions that prohibited churches and pastors from performing a same-sex marriage. The General Conference also added protections for pastors and churches with traditional stances on marriage:
 - Protections were added for clergy who, as a matter of conscience, choose not to officiate a same-sex marriage service. Clergy rights to determine the marriage services they perform are at their discretion and no Bishop, District Superintendent, or even local church can force a pastor to do a wedding if they choose not to officiate.
 - Two new sections were added stating, “*superintendent shall not penalize any clergy for performing, or refraining from performing, a same-sex marriage service.*” (**¶419.13, new**); and “*the superintendent shall neither require any local church to hold or prohibit a local church from holding a same-sex marriage service on property owned by a local church.*” (**¶419.14, new**)
 - The General Conference also asked for a declaratory ruling regarding ¶2533 and the power of the local church Board of Trustees in allowing or prohibiting same-sex ceremonies. The ruling, Decision Number 1503, states, “*nothing in the Book of Discipline prevents the Board of Trustees in the local church from*

adopting policies prohibiting the conduct of worship services that include same-sex marriage ceremonies.”

- ¶2533 and its subsequent interpretation, along with added protections of ¶419.13 and ¶419.14 ***codify in church law*** that pastors and churches can be faithful to their conscience on this issue, giving greater local control.
- This allows these important decisions to be made at the local church level, whether those churches are in the US, Europe, or another context where it is legally allowed. Keep in mind that in many annual conferences outside of the US, same-sex marriage is illegal; both marriage and ordination are not legally allowed. Central Conferences already can adapt the Book of Discipline for contextual differences. Currently, the US does not have that ability. That can only happen at General Conference.

Financial Implications to Help the Local Church

- The total budget of the UMC will be significantly smaller. A 95% majority of the delegates approved a 2025-2028 denominational budget of \$373.4 million. That is dependent on a collection rate of 90%. If that doesn't happen, the amount would be \$353.6 million. The budget will be either 38% or 41% lower compared to the \$604 million budget from 2016.
- The UMC in the United States provides the bulk of financial support for denomination-wide ministries in other countries. We are financially supporting the work of Jesus where the church is growing the fastest, for example in Africa. Our connection allows work for the kingdom to continue as more and more people come to know Christ.
- Connected to this budget work, we had to approve the reduction of the number of bishops in the US. We set the number at 32. This will mark a decrease from the 39 active bishops currently serving in the US and down from the 46 that were included in the budget in 2016. We did approve adding two new bishops in Africa where the church is growing. They need more, but due to budget restrictions we decided on two. They will have a total of 15 bishops.
- The budget reduction again highlights the importance of the local church. The desire is for more money to stay in the local areas and less go to the denominational overhead. We wanted more to go to mission and ministry.
- Local decision making, local control, local cost savings...that was a driving motivator as we balanced the importance of continuing support for mission and ministry across our global connection.

Other Items

- While we support and encourage creation care to help the climate and encourage the church to do better, we did not prohibit investing in fossil fuels. The General Administration Legislative Committee overwhelmingly said we do not need to prohibit investments in these companies. We can work with them to enact good changes by joining them at the table.
- We approved full communion with The Episcopal Church.
- Ordained Deacons were granted sacramental authority. They are now able to offer Holy Communion and conduct baptisms in their ministry settings.
- We approved a new clergy retirement program. This new program was needed for sustainability and to start a new program for younger clergy that will assist them better in their retirement. It also helps clergy in lower income brackets who are not always able to invest much in their retirements.
- Sadly, we approved the departure of four Eurasian annual conferences that plan to become autonomously affiliated with the UMC, but a separate denomination called the Christian Methodist Church. Some news outlets stated this was due to the UMC position on human sexuality, but that isn't the full story. These four conferences are in Russia. In talking with the delegates, I learned that they lament leaving the UMC. But the geo-political climate is hostile between Russia and the US, and remember, the UMC is still a US-based denomination. They were under pressure to depart due to our connections. Bishop Eduard Kheghey gave an emotional speech on the floor thanking the UMC over and over and over.
- We apologized to those who have experienced sexual misconduct in the UMC. In the past, the church would protect clergy and staff more than hear the voices that were harmed. We recognized that we did not historically handle these in good ways. The apology will be read at all the annual and jurisdictional conferences.