

2 bishops offer plan for denomination's future

By Sam Hodges

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Two bishops propose turning The United Methodist Church into an umbrella organization for new, self-governing church groups that would offer different approaches on ordination of gay clergy and same-sex unions.

Michigan Conference Bishop David Bard and Texas Conference Bishop Scott Jones began collaborating on a plan after the rancorous 2019 General Conference and shared it with United Methodist News this week.

“We both envision a future where the church will focus on its mission of making disciples and spend less time and energy debating issues of human sexuality, which means we need to bless different parts of The United Methodist Church to be about the mission in their own ways,” Jones said.

The denomination has faced conflict for more than four decades over theological differences regarding homosexuality. The [2019 General Conference](#), held Feb. 23-26 in St. Louis, [reinforced restrictions](#) on LGBTQ ordination and same-sex unions, but also led to [protests and resistance](#) by many churches across the U.S.

Bard and Jones' plan comes as various groups of church leaders discuss options for the denomination, including schism. A Sept. 18 deadline looms for petitions to be submitted for the 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis.

Though bishops don't vote at General Conference, Bard and Jones said they feel an urgency to stimulate debate and action.

“We're offering this plan as a thought experiment that we hope others will take seriously and consider as they are making decisions about the future of the church,” Jones said.

Bard added, “Scott and I acknowledge that there's room for other ideas to be incorporated.”

Under the Bard-Jones plan – titled [“A New Form of Unity: A Way Forward Strategy 2019-2022”](#) – an annual conference would choose to join one of three groups the bishops are tentatively calling the Traditional Methodist Church, the Open Methodist Church and the Progressive Methodist Church.

The Traditional Methodist Church would begin with a Book of Discipline that includes the [Traditional Plan](#), which passed by a vote of 438 to 384 at the 2019 General

Conference and strengthened enforcement of restrictions on LGBTQ ordination and same-sex unions.

The Open Methodist Church and Progressive Methodist Church would begin with a Book of Discipline modified to include the [Simple Plan](#) as presented in St. Louis. That plan called for eliminating restrictions on same-sex unions and ordination of gay persons as clergy, as well as removing the church's official position that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Under the Bard-Jones proposal, the Progressive Methodist Church's Book of Discipline would be further modified to affirm clearly the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in marriage and ordination candidacy.

The Open Methodist Church and Progressive Methodist Church might choose to be one group, the bishops say.

The two or three churches would each decide on a name ("Methodist" isn't required to be part of it), and each would hold its own General Conferences, with complete freedom to revise its Book of Discipline. Each would fund its bishops and decide on approved seminaries.

The two or three churches would share in governing the General Council of Finance and Administration, Wespeth, the United Methodist Publishing House and the General Commission on Archives and History. They would contribute proportionally to the Black College Fund and Africa University.

Other general church agencies would have their own boards and be accountable to the Open Methodist Church but would provide services as requested to the other churches.

The United Methodist Church would no longer have individual members but would continue to exist "as an umbrella to facilitate this new form of unity," the plan says. The churches would be in full communion, and each could use the cross-and-flame logo of The United Methodist Church.

Though specific in many ways, the plan leaves unanswered big questions, such as the global nature of The United Methodist Church.

"Churches in Europe and Asia could form their own Methodist Churches or belong to one of the two or three churches, with the precise nature of the relationship to be determined," the plan says. "There would be a United Methodist Church in Africa, the precise affiliations to the two or three churches to be determined."

Asked about the ambiguity, Bard said, “While we’ve had conversations with our colleagues from other parts of the world, we didn’t want to go too far in defining what they may wish to do.”

Another unknown: Would these new churches have a Judicial Council?

“Each of the new church groupings would determine whether or not to form a Judicial Council or similar body,” Bard said.

The [Connectional Conference Plan](#) that failed at the 2019 General Conference would have realigned the denomination according to perspectives on LGBTQ inclusion, as does Bard-Jones.

But the Connectional Conference Plan required constitutional amendments, a lengthy process involving votes throughout the annual conferences. Bard and Jones believe their plan could be launched by General Conference action only.

“The key is the proposal to allow U.S. annual conferences to leave the denomination,” they say in the plan. “It was contained in section 9 of petition 90041 of the Traditional Plan. This section of the petition was ruled constitutional by the Judicial Council. Because the petition died in the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, section 9 would need to be reintroduced and passed in 2020.”

The Bard-Jones plan foresees churches that disagree with their annual conference’s affiliation decision having the right “to transfer conferences with their assets, thereby joining a different church.”

The plan also lays out an implementation timetable, with the 2020 General Conference approving the major steps, followed by annual conferences choosing their affiliations with one of the two or three new churches in 2021 and the first General Conferences of those churches in 2022.

Bard and Jones have known each other since long before they were episcopal colleagues, having crossed paths at Southern Methodist University, where they both earned Ph.Ds.

They said they have shared their plan with fellow bishops as well as with groups discussing the future of the church. The stakes are high, and the two bishops hope to have an influence.

“Our plan offers a vision for keeping as much unity as possible and a pathway for decisions to be made,” Jones said.

Hodges is a Dallas-based writer for United Methodist News.

**Summary of Jones-Bard Plan
A New Form of Unity
A Way Forward Strategy 2019-2022
Bishops David A. Bard and Scott J. Jones
July 8, 2019**

Brief Analysis of Our Current Situation

Responses to the passage of many petitions that comprised the Traditional Plan, and the subsequent Judicial Council rulings upholding approximately half the petitions passed, have been strong and diverse, from vigorous support for the legislation and a determination to strengthen it at the 2020 General Conference, along with a feeling that it is simply time for The United Methodist Church to move on, to intense dissent from the legislation along with indications that people may act in ways contrary to it. These responses reveal in stark terms the depth of division which exists within our denomination. What are the possibilities for moving into the future to address our division and the animosity which often accompanies it?

- Move into the future as we have lived in the recent past, relying on the legislative processes of General Conference to help us make needed change. This would likely lead to few changes to the Traditional Plan and thus continue the escalating cycle of more rules and more defiance thereby damaging our Wesleyan witness.
- One “group” or the other (progressives or traditionalists) simply decides to leave and start something new. This could be facilitated by a more defined gracious exit process which would need to be negotiated between groups representing differing sides of our disagreement.
- A “forced schism” either through countless judicial processes leading to the removal of progressive pastors and bishops and the disaffiliation of more progressive churches, or by massive resistance and disobedience by progressives which they hope might lead to the withdrawal of traditional pastors and bishops and the disaffiliation of more traditional churches. Uncalculated damage could come from such a chaotic way forward. Planning Annual Conferences and General Church bodies would become extraordinarily difficult as resources are withheld or diverted to judicial processes. Intense, angry conflict would significantly damage our Wesleyan witness. The role of bishop would be consumed by conflict management and judicial processes.
- Begin with a vision of what we would like The United Methodist Church to look like in 2022 and negotiate a new unity, a new connectionalism, a new Methodism, an amicable separation, or a mutual blessing/parting of the ways, which creates more space between United Methodists who are not currently living well together.

- We believe that annual conferences are the crucial vehicles for achieving this new form of unity with as little disruption and conflict as possible.

Vision: What do we want the United Methodist Church to look like in 2022?

We envision a more vibrant and missionally effective Wesleyan movement that no longer spends significant energy debating questions of human sexuality and LGBTQ inclusion. To achieve this, we envision that the United Methodist Church will have no individual members in 2025 and that all current members, clergy, congregations and bishops will join one of two or three self-governing churches. The United Methodist Church would continue to exist as an umbrella organization to facilitate this new form of unity. Whether there are two or three self-governing churches is a matter for further conversation. • The churches will be in full communion.

- All the churches may use the name “Methodist” but are not required to do so.
- All the churches may use the cross-and-flame logo but are not required to do so.
- We envision regular contact between leadership teams of the churches to coordinate shared mission and cooperation.
- It is envisioned that bishops of all the churches will hold regular meetings for the purpose of coordinating expressions of unity.
- It is envisioned that all the churches will choose to belong to the World Methodist Council, the Pan-Methodist Commission and other ecumenical bodies.
- All the churches will share in the governance of the General Council on Finance and Administration, Wespeth, the United Methodist Publishing House, and The General Commission on Archives and History with governance strength proportional to lay membership strength.
- The General Board of Global Ministries (including UMCOR), General Board of Discipleship, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Communications, General Commission on Religion and Race, General Commission on the Status and Role of Women and General Commission on United Methodist Men will all have boards elected by and accountable to the Open Methodist Church but provide services as requested to the Progressive and Traditional Methodist Churches and to affiliated Methodist churches outside the United States as they may organize.
- Each church will contribute proportionally to a General Administration Fund which will only support GCAH and a greatly reduced staff and budget of GCFA. Each church will contribute proportionally to the Black College Fund and the Africa University Fund.

Africa University will be governed by a board elected by the African Central Conferences which may include persons from outside Africa as well. The Black College Fund will be administered by a committee elected by and accountable to the Open Methodist Church.

- Each church will have its own financial administration organization to handle episcopal funds for central conferences, agencies and other connectional expenses.

- Each church will fund its own bishops.

- There will be no World Service Fund, Episcopal Fund, Interdenominational Cooperation Fund or Ministerial Education Fund unless established by the new church.

- Each of the churches could be global with member conferences in Europe, North America and Asia. Churches in Europe and Asia could form their own Methodist Churches or to belong to one of the two or three churches, with the precise nature of the relationship to be determined. There would be a United Methodist Church in Africa, the precise affiliations to the two or three churches to be determined.

- The rights to the name “United Methodist” and the cross-and-flame logo will belong to the General Council on Finance and Administration. Divisible Assets will be distributed to the churches in proportion to the numerical strength of their lay membership. GCFA’s governing Council membership will be proportional to the lay membership strength of each church. Each church will elect its own representatives to GCFA.

- Each church will have its own General Conference with complete freedom to change its originating Book of Discipline after 2020. The current constitution of the UMC will be adaptable by a majority vote of the first General Conference of each church.

- Each Church will select its own name. It will begin with the current Book of Discipline as modified by the following:

- The Progressive Methodist Church Discipline will include the Simple Plan as presented in 2019, and would be further modified so that full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in marriage and eligibility for candidacy, commissioning, ordination and appointment was clearly affirmed.

- The Open Methodist Church Discipline will include the Simple Plan as presented in 2019. The Progressive and Open Methodist Churches may decide to be a single Methodist Church.

- The Traditional Methodist Church Discipline will include the Traditional Plan as presented in 2019. It will keep the current social principles and standards for ordination.

- In 2022 each church will hold a General Conference which will re-write its Book of Discipline by majority vote of the delegates. That conference will have the right to

choose whether or not to have a constitution. Each church will have the right to amend its doctrinal statements, adopt a new constitution, set its own standards for church membership and ordination and all other matters of polity and doctrine.

- Each church will determine which seminaries are approved and how theological education, including M. Div. programs and Courses of Study will be organized and funded.
- Each church will decide on the election, assignment, duties and funding for its bishops.

Roadmap: What steps are necessary to implement the vision for a New Form of Unity?

The process for achieving this vision is most easily accomplished by using different pieces of legislation presented to the 2019 General Conference. The key is the proposal to allow US annual conferences to leave the denomination. It was contained in section 9 of petition 90041 of the Traditional Plan (2019 ADCA pp. 187-88). This section of the petition was ruled constitutional by the Judicial Council. Because the petition died in the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, section 9 would need to be reintroduced and passed in 2020. Under this provision, when an annual conference decides to leave the denomination by majority vote, congregations and clergy who disagree with that choice are allowed to transfer conferences with their assets, thereby joining a different church.

The roadmap involves approval of key ideas at the General Conference of 2020. Following that, annual conferences worldwide would decide by majority vote which of two or three churches they will join: the Progressive Methodist Church, the Open Methodist Church or the Traditional Methodist Church or outside the United States, the churches that may be organized there (e.g. The United Methodist Church of Africa). Congregations which wish to transfer conferences will be allowed to do so with all of their assets though agreement between the conference and the congregation for debts owed for past pension and health care benefits already or conference loans would need to be negotiated. Pension liabilities would be cared for.

To limit the acrimony in this transition, legislation suspending the paragraphs or portions thereof related to complaints against persons for officiating at same-sex weddings or for the consideration of LGBTQ persons for candidacy, licensing, commissioning and ordination beginning at the end of General Conference 2020 and continuing through the first General Conferences of the new churches would be part of the New Form of Unity legislation.

All of this could be accomplished with no constitutional amendments. However, clear agreements about details, including the assets and continuing ministries of all other general agencies would need to be agreed upon.

2019

August Agreement in principle by key stakeholders for taking steps leading the new form of unity

September..... Petitions due to 2020 General Conference
2020

May General Conference approves steps required for the new form of unity and provision for annual conferences in the US to leave the UMC

May to July 2021 Annual Conferences choose which church to affiliate with and local churches ask to change conferences if they so desire

2021

May to April 2022 Annual Conferences elect delegates to General Conferences

2022

Summer or Fall First General Conferences of the three new churches are held