

UMCNext plan would end LGBTQ restrictions

By Sam Hodges

Aug. 19, 2019 | DALLAS (UM News)

A group of centrists and progressives is offering a plan that would eliminate The United Methodist Church's restrictions against LGBTQ ordination and same-sex weddings, while allowing local churches that disagree to depart and organize into new forms of Methodism.

This latest effort to address the denomination's deep, longstanding division over homosexuality comes from the convening team of the UMCNext coalition, which includes Reconciling Ministries Network, Uniting Methodists and Mainstream UMC.

"The [UMCNext Proposal](#) allows a creative way for churches to build a new expression of Methodism if desired and a path to create a renewed global United Methodist Church for those who remain," said the Rev. Junius B. Dotson, executive convener of the team and top executive of United Methodist Discipleship Ministries.

Though the plan is still being fleshed out in petition form, backers say it would keep The United Methodist Church intact, while also allowing greater regional autonomy and a gracious exit.

The plan clearly anticipates the exodus of some churches.

"Respectful separation is a way for us to keep faith with how each region and sector discerns the will of God for Christian living and mission while doing no harm, doing all the good we can and sustaining our attention to loving and serving God," says a statement released with the plan's basic components.

The United Methodist Church has faced conflict for decades over how accepting to be of homosexuality. The volatile 2019 special General Conference in St. Louis — [which by a 438-384 vote approved the Traditional Plan](#) reinforcing restrictions on ordination and same-sex weddings — has led to broad agreement that separation or some form of major reorganization is needed.

The UMCNext Proposal follows the recent public debut of the [Bard-Jones Plan](#), offered by two United Methodist bishops and calling for The United Methodist Church to remain as an umbrella organization for mostly separate groups. Also recently unveiled — and conceived by a group of centrists, progressives and traditionalists — is the [Indianapolis Plan](#), which would create at least two separate denominations.

The petitions deadline for the 2020 General Conference is Sept. 18, and talks continue among various groups.

For example, bishops from non-U.S. central conferences organized an Aug. 16-17 meeting at Floris United Methodist Church, in Herndon, Virginia. There, a theologically diverse group of church leaders reviewed the UMCNext plan and others.

“During the candid and prayerful discussions, the group agreed that it seems inevitable that there will be some form of separation of the church as a way to resolve the impasse,” [a press release said](#).

The UMCNext coalition grew out of two meetings of centrist and progressive leaders held soon after the 2019 General Conference. A much larger gathering [was held May 20-22](#) at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas.

Afterwards, the group announced four commitments, including opposing the Traditional Plan as passed in St. Louis, and working to end restrictions against LGBTQ participation in The United Methodist Church.

The UMCNext Proposal would have an immediate moratorium on charges against LGBTQ clergy, clergy performing same-sex weddings or other charges stemming from provisions of the Traditional Plan.

And it would remove from the United Methodist Book of Discipline language used to restrict pastors and churches from conducting same-sex weddings and annual conferences from licensing or ordaining “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” — as has been official policy for decades.

“Ministers will have the same ability they do now per the current Book of Discipline to determine who is ready for marriage. The plan treats everyone fairly and equitably and allows us to reimagine a United Methodist Church free from the current restriction and welcoming all of God’s children,” said Jan Lawrence, a member of the convening team and executive director of Reconciling Ministries Network, which works for full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church.

The plan would let local churches in annual conferences — be they part of jurisdictional (U.S.) or central conferences (non-U.S. conferences in Africa, Europe and the Philippines) — decide by a two-thirds vote to “enter a new life as a Wesleyan church.” That exit offer extends through 2024.

Groups of departing churches that, in the plan’s language “form a viable denomination,” will be allocated resources to get started under a formula to be arrived at with the help of a professional mediator.

The plan “provides a gracious exit for those who wish to leave, and allows pastors and churches to minister according to their convictions,” said the Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection and a UMCNext convening team member.

As drafted, the plan does not call for allowing annual conferences to leave the denomination.

Dotson said the UMCNext Proposal is designed to be timely and simple, and to avoid the lengthy process of constitutional amendments.

“The concern is that the Judicial Council may not uphold the departure of an annual conference as constitutional,” Dotson said.

Other components of the UMCNext Proposal include:

- Retaining current doctrinal standards of the Book of Discipline.
- Creating a Commission on the 21st Century Church to prepare a comprehensive structure and governance plan for consideration at a special General Conference in 2022 that would serve as a constitutional convention.
- Passing legislation currently proposed by the Connectional Table to create a U.S. regional conference.
- Allowing departing churches in viable new denominations to contract for services with United Methodist agencies, including Wespath, the United Methodist Committee on Relief and the General Commission on Archives and History.

Dotson said a group of departing churches using Wespath could save at least 40 percent over market rate “to secure their share of unfunded pensions liability.”

He said the key would be the viability of such groups, and that Wespath would define the standard of viability.

A timetable released by UMCNext calls for the moratorium on charges, complaints and trials to be approved at the [2020 General Conference, set for May 5-15 in Minneapolis](#). The plan also envisions that gathering approving disaffiliation legislation, a resource allocation formula and the creation of the Commission on the 21st Century Church.

The special called 2022 General Conference would, according to the plan, remove all church policy language related to LGBTQ persons and deal with regional conference legislation as well as adaptation of the Book of Discipline and new concordat or covenant agreements among Wesleyan groups.

“It appears that we are unable, for now, to walk the same path forward,” says a statement released with the UMCNext Proposal. “We can choose to part with a blessing, understanding that our Wesleyan roots will always bind us together even as some may choose to branch out into distinctive expressions of the church.”

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

The UMCNext Proposal Overview

United Methodists are unified in their shared desire to experience something new, whether it be new birth, renewal, or resurrection. Our common desire to share Christ with others, bless the poor and marginalized, and serve our communities remains. We share a desire to devote ourselves to a Wesleyan Christian witness in our various missional contexts.

Different segments of United Methodists, however, hold considerably divergent views about how the resources of our faith guide us to live the Christian life. We are currently at an impasse over controversies about UM social teachings concerning the Wesleyan understanding of holiness, LGBTQ inclusion and church governance. It appears that we are unable, for now, to walk the same path forward. We can choose to part with a blessing, understanding that our Wesleyan roots will always bind us together even as some may choose to branch out into distinctive expressions of the church.

Separation is a faithful step offered in the UMCNext Proposal to those who experience God's calling to move in different directions. The witness of the Bible demonstrates that God can use separation of ministry partners like Paul, Barnabas, and Mark (Acts 15:37-40) to reach more people as the good news is shared in different ways. The UMCNext Proposal acknowledges the severity of current disagreements in the church. It offers greater self-determination for churches within central and jurisdictional conferences in the global connection, as well as the capacity to begin new expressions of a Wesleyan church. It also calls for a future for all parties that invites new birth and reformation in the hope that all will be led to offer Christ and serve in the world for the glory of God.

The UMCNext Proposal provides a way for The United Methodist Church to move forward with a renewed vision, missional alignment, and self-definition. It offers its members a path to remain and reimagine The United Methodist Church or separate from it. The proposal does not create winners or losers; instead, it multiplies our witness in new forms. It takes seriously the difficult work we must do to best serve the mission of the church in fresh ways. It charts a course to the future and enables all of us to take the faithful steps that will enable everyone to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

When fully enacted, the UMCNext Proposal provides all parties with a greater degree of adaptability within their missional context so that every member of the global church can follow God's calling. It gives the church the opportunity to fully enact its theology of mission with an emphasis on partnerships and cooperation in ministry.

Various parts of the church will be able to focus on issues of importance to them while maintaining the framework of our historic connectional ministry.

Respectful separation is a way for us to keep faith with how each region and sector discerns the will of God for Christian living and mission while doing no harm, doing all the good we can, and sustaining our attention to loving and serving God.

Key Elements of the Proposal

- *Stop charges, investigations, and trials.*
 - o *An immediate moratorium on charges against LGBTQ clergy, clergy performing same-sex weddings, or other charges stemming from the provisions of the Traditional Plan.*

- *Self-determination*
 - o *There is a process to remain or depart from The UMC.*
 - o *Local Churches within jurisdictional and central conferences are offered both a choice to join a new expression of the church and the means to make this decision. Those churches who do not desire to make this decision will remain in the United Methodist Church.*

- *Resources*
 - o *Appropriate financial resources, if needed, are offered to viable denominations formed by former United Methodist congregations that are new expressions of the Wesleyan movement in order to enable them to begin well.*
 - o *Congregations who depart to form a new expression will provide adequate provision for their unfunded pension and other liabilities in the most reasonable fashion possible. Where viable new Wesleyan denominations are formed from these churches, earned benefits of clergy in disaffiliating local churches are preserved, and liabilities of the disaffiliating units should be accounted for, allocated by Wespath, and become the obligations of the new expression(s).*
 - o *Shared services, including but not limited to Wespath, UMCOR, and the General Commission on Archives and History, are offered to new expressions formerly a part of The UMC.*

- *Mediation*
 - o *A professional mediator is used to help all parties process aspects of this legislation and its financial component.*
 - o *Best selection criteria for mediator: non-United Methodist, certified and experienced, pro bono.*

- *Covenant*
 - o *An agreement of the future relationship, similar to a concordat (§574) or covenant (§573) that Wesleyan churches outside of the U.S. and other churches, respectively, may enter, is offered and negotiated for approval at the 2020 General Conference.*

- *Remove the terms of the General Conference 2019 Traditional Plan and other incompatibility references from The Book of Discipline*
- *Prevent future conflict.*
 - o *Allow every part of the global church to serve its missional needs. The BOD would be adaptable across the regions.*
- *Progress that is timely*
 - o *There must be a called General Conference in 2022 to move into the future, change provisions of the Book of Discipline, and consider and enact a polity designed for the 21st century.*
- *Simplicity*
 - o *The plan must be simple enough to be fully understood.*
 - o *The plan must be simple and fair enough to pass.*

Components of the Proposal

In response to the passage of the Traditional Plan and the concern that the United Methodist Church should not be defined by a plan that insists on uniformity of belief and practice in a divergent and contextualized global church, the UMCNext Proposal includes the following provisions:

1. *Create a moratorium on all complaints and disciplinary proceedings related to the enforcement and accountability mechanisms connected to the Traditional Plan, including any complaints or disciplinary proceedings related to clergy performing same-sex weddings in our churches or the licensing, commissioning, or ordination of LGBT persons.*
2. *LocalChurchDisaffiliation—allows local churches in annual conferences in jurisdictional and central conferences who vote with a two-thirds majority to enter a new life as a Wesleyan church. This opportunity is available until 2024. Those churches who form a viable denomination can partake of shared services such as Wespath, Archives and History, and UMCOR on a fee-for-service basis. This allowance applies to all local churches in the connection.*
3. *Resource Allocation Formula. Viable denominations formed by former United Methodist congregations that are new expressions of the Wesleyan movement will be allocated resources determined by a resource allocation formula. This formula will be determined with the assistance of a professional mediator with the goal of helping a new expression begin well. Funds would need to be budgeted by the 2020 General Conference.*
4. *Create a Commission on the 21st Century Church to prepare a comprehensive proposal for a for new structure and governance plan that addresses historic inequities*

and injustice and includes clarification related to the adaptability of The Book of Discipline.

5. Call a Special Session of the General Conference in 2022 that would serve as a Constitutional Convention. The purpose of this meeting is to ensure that The UMC takes the next faithful step to create a new structure of The UMC according to a renewed/resurrected mission, vision, and values.

6. Remove all language in The Book of Discipline used to restrict pastors and churches from conducting same-sex weddings and annual conferences from licensing or ordaining self-avowed, practicing LGBTQ persons.

7. Pass the legislation currently proposed by the Connectional Table to create a U.S. Regional Conference.

8. Concordator covenant agreements should be entered among all resulting Methodist expressions.

Timeline

August – September 18, 2019

Write the UMCNext Proposal

Write and submit related legislation

May 2020 – General Conference

Moratorium on charges, complaints and trials Pass disaffiliation legislation – expires in

2024 Pass Resource Allocation Formula

Create Commission on the 21st Century Church

May 2022 – Called General Conference

Regional Conference legislation

Adaptable Book of Disciplines

Report of the Commission on the 21st Century Church Remove all language related to LGBTQ persons Covenant or Concordat Agreements