



Dear friends,

There is tremendous urgency for regionalization in the United Methodist Church. As we prepare for General Conference 2024, it is important to re-familiarize ourselves with the state of the church. We initially posted a version of this article after the disastrous General Conference in St. Louis—and the urgency for regionalization has only grown since that time. Between Covid and the string of disaffiliations in the US church, we are working to gather current numbers. We will publish regular updates as they become available.

Please forward this article to friends and family so we can all work with the same, basic information! This article is long, but it serves as an important baseline and reference point for where we are as a church.

Introduction:

Paragraph 101 in the United Methodist Book of Discipline allows Central Conferences (those outside of the United States) to adapt portions of the rules to fit their cultural contexts. The U.S. church does not have the same permission. This paragraph was put in place when the U.S. church had an overwhelming majority of votes at General Conference and it was, ironically, an attempt to be less colonial than we had been in the past. Now that representation at General Conference between U.S. and non-U.S. delegates is nearly even, the lack of reciprocity in paragraph 101 is a glaring tribute to our growing imbalance.

A two-thirds (2/3) majority of the U.S. church voted at the 2019 General Conference for cultural contextualization through the One Church Plan. It was telling that eighty percent (80%) of the delegates from outside the U.S. declared, through their support of the Traditional Plan, that they are unwilling to allow the U.S. jurisdictions the same cultural contextualization they enjoy. This lack of reciprocity from delegates outside the U.S. may well lead to the end of our connection as we know it.

Four years after this vote, the Traditional Plan continues to harm LGBTQ individuals and the persons and churches who care for them. While there is no question that the U.S. church must continue to be in mission and ministry around the world, it is impossible to share a governance structure with a global church that is imposing its will on the culture of the United States.

This new reality gives us 5 reasons why the UMC needs a reciprocal, regional structure.

1. We are not really a global church.

The United Methodist Church is the single largest of the many denominations that make up the “Methodist” family around the world. Yet, even before Covid and the disaffiliations, we made up only about 30% of all Methodists in the world and just above 50% of the Methodist family in the US. Further, the UMC is only in the United States, parts of Africa, the Philippines, and parts of Europe. All Methodists in Mexico, Central America, South America, Britain, India, China, and Korea are autonomous from the UMC. In fact, half of all Methodists in Africa are autonomous.

The UMC is in ministry and mission with all Methodists around the world, but we do not share a common Book of Discipline. The vast majority of the Methodist world thrives under regional governance structures. Ironically, because Paragraph 101 does not reciprocate, the U.S. church is the only member of the world Methodist family that does not have regional autonomy. You can see the numbers and locations of all Methodists at the World Methodist Council website

link below. There is also a link to maps of the “global” UMC published by the General Conference.

2. The voting imbalance at General Conference is irreversible.

Prior to the 1990’s, as provisional annual conferences outside of the United States reached a certain size, they became independent, “autonomous” Methodist churches. But during the 1990’s there was a shift in practice—though there was never a formal vote to change policy. The numbers speak for themselves.

Percentage of General Conference Delegates from outside of the U.S.

1980	8%
1992	11%
2004	20%
2016	42%
Coming to GC 2024	44%

After Covid and the disaffiliations in the US, 2024 will be the last Global General Conference with a US majority.

There are likely three reasons why the U.S. church began absorbing global annual conferences. First, the U.S. church is 90% white and mostly middle class, and the international church adds important diversity. Second, the United Methodist Church had begun a numeric decline which was reversed by adding 5 million members from the churches in Africa. Third, there were many at General Conference who were delighted to receive an abundant number of reliably conservative votes.

The chart below shows voting distribution at the 2016 & 2019 General Conferences. Note that by adding up the numbers from the Philippines, Europe, and the Concordat churches, 100 votes came from outside the U.S. with a combined U.M. population of only 260,000! The One Church Plan failed by only 45 votes.

Region	U.M. Population		G.C. Votes	Notes
	2016 +/-			
United States	7 million		504	1 vote per 14,000

Africa	5 million	260	1 vote per 19,000
Philippines	200,000	50	1 vote per 4,000
Europe	60,000	40	1 vote per 1,500
Concordat Churches (Britain, Caribbean, Mexico, Puerto Rico)	0	10	We reciprocate votes to their conferences.
Total	12.25 million +/-	864	
For Comparison:			
Great Plains Conf. (Kansas & Nebraska)	200,000	14	1 vote per 14,285

3. The voting at General Conference shows the global divide in the church.

Both Tom Lambrecht of Good News and David Livingston of Mainstream UMC agree on the voting numbers from General Conference 2019. In short, 60% of the votes to impose the Traditional Plan on the U.S. church were cast by international delegates. In fact, 80% of all non-U.S. delegates and 90% of all African delegates voted against 2/3 of the U.S. church on a policy that only affects the practice of ministry in the United States. There is no question that full rights for LGBTQ persons in the United States would have passed as many as 12 years ago with a U.S. only vote. This is similar to when full inclusion came to the U.S. only structures of the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and UCC churches.

Rev. Lambrecht and Rev. Livingston also both agree that in 2019 2/3 of the U.S. delegates voted for the One Church Plan and are willing to live with differences regarding inclusion of LGBTQ persons. This lines up with research from the Pew Research Center that showed even back in 2014 60% of U.S. Methodists supported same-sex marriage. They note that “Americans’ views about homosexuality have shifted further since the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2015 decision to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide.” And, there are more United Methodists still who hold a conservative view on homosexuality who are willing to live with difference. The vote at the 2019 General Conference is even more visibly out of step as the current disaffiliations show that more than 80% of the US church supports living together, even with differences.

4. We have a quirky, not very democratic system.

There are several quirky issues that would need to be addressed to fix our unfixable system. For instance, all votes at General Conference are cast in secret, despite this being a legislative session. Some have argued that secret ballots have helped advance social justice issues in the church. Moving forward, we will need to discern the balance between ensuring everyone can vote their conscience and ensuring accountability.

There are yawning cultural gaps in discernment and vote casting. For instance, 44 annual conferences outside the United States reported votes on one or more of the 2016 constitutional amendments as a unanimous bloc—either 100% for or 100% against. Consequently, the constitutional amendment about the equality of women failed by 0.2% worldwide. This bloc voting was expected and carried out at General Conference with more than 90% of the African delegates voting for the Traditional Plan (numbers that are widely agreed upon but extrapolated from other known data points...because all votes are secret.)

Finally, the conservative advocacy groups, Wesleyan Covenant Association, Good News, and the Institute for Religion and Democracy have aggressively courted international votes through the years. They have held rallies in Africa, funded on-site, pre-General Conference gatherings, purchased cell phones to text voting preferences, served breakfasts, lunches and dinners and passed out voting guides to push their agenda. Clearly, their advocacy has been aimed at propping up the views of a shrinking minority of conservative delegates in the United States.

Despite the recent disaffiliations, all these conservative advocacy groups are coming back to General Conference in 2024!

5. The financial imbalance in the church is unsustainable.

Under the pre-Covid apportionment system, the U.S. church contributed \$600 million of the \$604 million 2017-2020 quadrennial budget (99.3%). The rest of the world contributed \$4 million (0.7%). For the sake of comparison, the Great Plains Conference has 200,000 members, remitted \$4.2 million to the global church in 2018, and gets 14 votes on how to spend it. The non-U.S. annual

conferences have 5.25 million members, remitted an aggregate of \$1.2 million to the global church in 2018, and have 360 votes at General Conference. No one disagrees that the U.S. church should bear the majority of the funding, but an unsustainable imbalance exists between membership, finances, and votes.

Now with 20% of US Churches disaffiliating from the UMC, the remaining U.S. constituents will bear an even greater financial imbalance with fewer than 50% of the votes at future General Conferences. Again, the U.S. church is willing to fund mission and ministry around the world, but why should it fund a governance structure that is actively harming the remaining 80% of U.S. churches? Finances may not split the church, but finances will split with the church, especially if the international church refuses to reciprocate cultural contextualization and continues to impose its will on the U.S. jurisdictions.

Conclusion: Our entire global governance/administrative/financial structure must change.

The U.S. jurisdictions want to continue in mission and ministry around the world. However, the current apparatus is an outdated relic of Western colonialism and is irreparably broken. If the structure does not change, cultural values will continue to be imposed upon one region of the world by another. It is one thing to hold a conservative view of homosexuality; it is another to pass the Traditional Plan and actively harm LGBTQ persons and their allies. The only recourse is a new structure of regional governance that makes sense for our various contexts.

We must act with a sense of urgency. The GC 2019 vote for the Traditional Plan has created a permanent rift between 80% of the U.S. church and everyone else. Mainstream UMC is committed to stopping the harm against our LGBTQ siblings and to creating a fair, regional structure for the church. Future articles will highlight the options available to us.

We need your help to create change at the 2024 General Conference! Because of our current structure, all change will continue to be an uphill climb. Please contribute to the work of Mainstream UMC: www.MainstreamUMC.com/Donate

In Christ,
Rev. Dr. Mark Holland
Executive Director, Mainstream UMC
www.MainstreamUMC.com

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Notes:

Again, we are working at pulling together accurate, post-covid, post disaffiliation numbers. Below are the references for the statistics above.

Numbers of Methodists around the world. <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about/member-churches/statistical-information/>

Map of United Methodists around the world. GC 2016 Advanced Daily Advocate p 30-34: http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/general-conference/2016/documents/gc2016-advance-daily-christian-advocate-full-english.pdf

Delegate counts from 1980, 1992, 2004, 2016, 2019 Advanced Daily Christian Advocate

Population of conferences and number of votes at General Conference. http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/press-center/documents/2020_Delegate_Calc_by_AC_with_2016_comp.pdf

Tom Lambrecht's 2019 General Conference math: <https://goodnewsmag.org/2019/03/doing-general-conference->

[math/](#) Note, this link on the Good News website no longer works.

2016 Constitutional Amendment votes broken down by annual conference. http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/documents/Detailed_results_of_Annual_Conference_Votes_on_Constitutional_Amendments.pdf

Pew Research Center <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/26/rift-over-gay-rights-comes-as-united-methodists-in-us-have-become-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/>

GC 2016 passes \$604 million quadrennial budget. <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/gc2016-passes-604-million-general-church-budget>

Central Conferences contribute about \$4 million a year of the \$604 million quadrennial budget.

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/plan-calls-for-global-funding-of-general-church>



Mainstream UMC
PO Box 8374, Prairie Village, Kansas 66208
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