



Dear Friends,

General Conference is both a legislative body where people vote and the official voice of the United Methodist Church. It met for the first time in 1784 at what has been dubbed “The Christmas Conference.” It has been described by historian John Strawbridge as “...ten days of debates and struggles and accusations and reconciliations, and the kinds of things that we do as Methodists, which is beautiful in its own way.”

Beauty is clearly in the eye of the beholder.

Yet, John Wesley himself believed that “Holy Conferencing” is a “means of grace” similar to worship, bible study, and holy communion. In other words, he believed that the way we speak to one another in meetings can reveal the grace of God. While that has not always been my experience at General Conference, I have faith that it can be. If we can be honest with one another (see link below), if we can have clarity of mission (see link below), and if we can manage expectations, then grace will abound. So, what can we reasonably expect at General Conference 2024?

**Most of Us Want to Stay Together:**

This is a powerful starting point. Virtually everyone still in the United Methodist Church wants to hold together our relationships with the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Philippines. The energy around regionalization from the

Christmas Covenant, the Connectional Table, the Council of Bishops, the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, all point to a desire to stay together. And while we have not heard from annual conferences in Africa, there have been consistent messages from Bishops and advocacy groups in Africa that they want to remain United Methodist. Translating this consensus to remain together into votes for legislation to implement regionalization is the work to which Mainstream UMC is committed. And we live in the promise of Jesus, "Where two or more are gathered in my name, I will be with you also." (Matthew 18:20)

### **We All Have Limits:**

A United Methodist pastor from Liberia (who supports regionalization) recently asked me, "Would the US church stay in relationship with the church in Africa if we publicly supported polygamy or no longer ordained women?" He was not suggesting either is likely, but his point is valid; there are limits to what regionalization can bridge. He is concerned that the US and Europe openly ordaining and marrying LGBTQ persons may be a bridge too far for many Africans, where the stakes around homosexuality are much higher. United Methodists have churches in 23 African countries. Homosexuality (defined as sexual acts) is criminalized in 16 of those countries (see list and sources below). Regardless of how generous the delegates and Bishops in Africa may feel towards regionalization, they face serious social, political, and even legal pressure back home unlike anything we face in the US and Europe.

### **The Clock is Ticking for the US Church:**

The US church has to change the language in the Book of Discipline that harms LGBTQ persons. People voted to leave the UMC in this country BECAUSE we are changing the language. Failure to change the language at General Conference 2024 may begin an exodus from the left. We likely have the votes (a simple majority) to change the language now. We are likely NOT to have the votes at the next General Conference if regionalization fails. And, if that is not enough, there is significant concern that even talking about removing the language may undermine regionalization efforts. The stakes are high. The clock is ticking. This is not easy.

### **Dividers Gonna Divide:**

The US Jurisdictional Conferences in 2022 were overwhelmingly positive and free of division. That was also true of most US Annual Conferences in 2023. We need to manage expectations for General Conference 2024. First, the cultural consensus we have found in the US church is not necessarily shared globally. Second, the dividers—the trio of conservative advocacy groups—are all coming back to extend the disaffiliations and sabotage regionalization. If regionalization happens at General Conference, it will be in spite of these groups, not because of them.

### **Conclusion:**

In the end, we should expect a very challenging political environment at General Conference 2024. The US church desperately needs to change the harmful language. This goal is potentially in tension with our need to get 2/3 vote to pass regionalization. And, we can also expect God to be at work in ways that we haven't even imagined. Yes, we are trying to stay together in faith despite yawning cultural differences. Paul did it. Now we must.

We need your help to take the next steps! Please donate today to Mainstream UMC: [www.MainstreamUMC.com/Donate](http://www.MainstreamUMC.com/Donate)

Previous Articles on Next Steps:

1. Honesty: <https://mainstreamumc.com/blog/next-steps-1-of-3-honesty>
2. Clarity: <https://mainstreamumc.com/blog/next-steps-2-of-3-clarity>
3. Manage Expectations: What can we reasonably get done at GC 2024?

In Christ,

Rev. Dr. Mark Holland

Executive Director, Mainstream UMC

[www.MainstreamUMC.com](http://www.MainstreamUMC.com)

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Read More about the first Christmas Conference of 1784

here: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/methodist-history-the-christmas-conference>

Here is the Map of Countries with United Methodist Churches in Africa, pages 30-34: <gc2016-advance-daily-christian-advocate-full-english.pdf>

Here is the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association map of where homosexuality is

illegal: <https://database.ilga.org/criminalisation-consensual-same-sex-sexual-acts>

<p>UMC in African countries where homosexuality (defined as sexual acts) is <u>illegal</u>(criminalized):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Algeria</li><li>• Burundi</li><li>• Cameroon</li><li>• Kenya</li><li>• Liberia</li><li>• Malawi</li><li>• Namibia</li><li>• Nigeria</li><li>• Senegal</li><li>• Sierra Leone</li><li>• South Sudan</li><li>• Tanzania</li><li>• Tunisia</li><li>• Uganda</li><li>• Zambia</li><li>• Zimbabwe</li></ul>	<p>UMC in African countries where homosexuality is <u>legal</u>(meaning not criminalized; this does not mean widely accepted):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Angola</li><li>• Democratic Republic of Congo</li><li>• Guinea-Bissau</li><li>• Ivory Coast</li><li>• Mozambique</li><li>• Rwanda</li><li>• South Africa</li></ul>
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