



What Happened at the United Methodist General Conference?

A PeopleNeedJesus.net Info Sheet

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The main governing body of the United Methodist Church, General Conference, met in Charlotte, North Carolina from April 23-May 3, 2024. By anyone's estimation, this long-delayed meeting was a watershed event marking a new direction for the UMC as a progressive denomination, especially in the United States. The denomination prepared a compilation of [laudable legislative outcomes](#). What follows is a summary of notable actions that run counter to traditional Methodism.

Marriage is Redefined in United Methodism

A revised set of social principles were approved that broaden the definition of marriage to include two consenting adults. The new language: "Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith, an adult man and woman of consenting age, or two adult persons of consenting age into union with one another."

Restrictions on LGBTQ Clergy Are Removed

The following language was stricken from the *Book of Discipline*: "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."

Language Forbidding Same-sex Weddings in UMC Sanctuaries Is Removed

Language barring same-sex weddings from being hosted in UM sanctuaries was removed. Although the Judicial Council [ruled](#) during General Conference that local church boards of trustees can set policies forbidding same-sex weddings, the ruling was vague on whether clergy are required to honor such policies.

Non-binary Gender Categories Are Embraced

Even before General Conference, [official statistics](#) used in the UMC allowed for a non-binary category of gender. At General Conference, all speakers were asked to state their name, conference, clergy/lay status, and age category for statistical purposes. Delegates who wished were invited to share their “preferred pronouns,” and many did.

Specific Language Related to Adultery Is Removed from Clergy Chargeable Offenses

General Conference edited the list of offenses for which a clergy could be charged by removing: “(a) immorality including but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not faithful in a heterosexual marriage; (b) practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings, including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.”

While “sexual misconduct” remains a chargeable offense, this definition of misconduct is less defined and subject to the discretion of bishops. There are concerns this change could open the door to permitting sex outside of marriage if consensual.

Abortion Stance Changed

General Conference approved a petition affirming a right to abortion and pledging “solidarity with those who seek reproductive health care.” The petition, “upholds a person’s right to an abortion after informed consideration with their family, medical practitioners, pastor, and other pertinent counsel.” It also denounces abortion bans. The Revised Social Principles are more nuanced on the topic of abortion, but the overall position of the UMC on abortion is pro-choice. The following words were deleted, “we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child.”

Church Funds Can Be Used to Promote Homosexuality

Annual conference and general church monies are no longer prohibited from being used to promote the acceptance of homosexuality. The policy was not only removed, but reversed. The provision now says the general finance agency should ensure that church funds do not go to anything that rejects LGBTQ people. The General Commission on Archives and History has

already [announced](#) the formation of a new “Center for LGBTQ+ United Methodist Heritage” using apportionment dollars.

Sexual Orientation Now a Mandated Diversity Category on Church Boards

The category of “sexual orientation” was added as a required category for mandated diversity on church commissions and agencies. Alongside race and gender diversity, people of various sexual orientations are now to be included in governing bodies.

Protections Previously Developed for Traditional United Methodists Mostly Omitted

The 2019 One Church Plan produced by the Commission on a Way Forward provided a raft of protections for traditionalists in the UMC that would accompany liberalization of the human sexuality position. These protections were mostly omitted from the changes approved at General Conference. While General Conference made clear that no clergy can be coerced into conducting same-sex weddings, the following One Church Plan protections were omitted: (1) Language to “affirm those who continue to maintain that the Scriptural witness does not condone the practice of homosexuality. We believe that their conscience should be protected in the church and throughout society under basic principles of religious liberty.” (2) Language stating that marriage has been “traditionally understood as a union of one man and one woman,” (3) Language stating that same-sex weddings would only be allowed in churches that specifically voted to host them, (4) Language allowing annual conferences to develop their own policies on human sexuality, and (5) Allowances for bishops to decline to ordain practicing gay clergy (the jurisdiction would have provided another bishop to ordain gay candidates in such an instance.)

Sex Outside of Marriage Not Forbidden for Clergy

Ordination Standards were changed to allow sex outside of marriage. ¶304.2 was changed as follows: “~~fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, social responsibility, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God~~ social responsibility, and faithful sexual intimacy expressed through fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, mutual consent, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.” Monogamous sex is no longer prohibited for single clergy.

Annual Conferences Required to Prepare Local Churches to Accept Gay Clergy

The definition of Open Itineracy was expanded to include accepting clergy regardless of sexual orientation. The revised ¶ 425.1 directs annual conferences to train Pastor Parish Relations Committees to receive pastors regardless of sexual orientation.

Divestment from Israel Recommended

In the first such action by a major Christian denomination, the General Conference voted divestment from Israel bonds. Approved Petition 20554-CC-R6111-G calls on the UMC to lobby the U.S. government to end military aid to Israel.

The General Board of Global Ministries Tasked with Furthering Intersectional Ideology

General Conference added a new ¶ 1302.16 requiring that the UMC mission board “provide training, resources, and consultation for and with all levels of the global church to actively resist intersecting structures of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, patriarchy, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, colonialism and classism.”

Constitutional Amendments Allowing Regionalization Were Approved

Sweeping changes to the UMC constitution were approved allowing U.S. jurisdictions to organize as a U.S. Region and adopt their own rules. If ratified in the annual conferences, these changes would prevent conservative global regions from affecting U.S.-based rules.

Why the Shift in Church Teaching was So Dramatic

In the fallout of a special General Conference in 2019 where the traditional understanding of marriage and human sexuality was upheld, U.S. progressives organized opposition with cooperation from certain U.S. bishops. Progressive slates of delegates were elected to represent several U.S. conferences. Amid this fallout, a high-profile plan, the Separation Protocol, was negotiated to divide the denomination. The General Conference set to approve separation was delayed twice due to COVID-19 and without controversy. A third delay until 2024 was viewed by traditionalists as unnecessary and [shrewdly calculated](#). The Global Methodist Church announced plans to form in May 2022 and traditionalists began to disaffiliate under a provision approved at GC2019 (but only applied to US churches). A quarter of the 30,000 UMC churches in the USA exited. Meanwhile, the UM Commission on the General Conference styled the 2024 meeting a “delayed General Conference 2020.” This allowed the US the same delegate as before the exodus. African delegates, already disenfranchised from their new majority status, suffered further set-backs when a quarter of their delegates were unable to attend due to travel visa issues. All these factors created a “boomerang effect” from the stated positions of the church in 2019.

No Exit Pathways Were Approved

The disaffiliation legislation had a sunset clause of December 31, 2023. It was not renewed by General Conference. This means that churches that wish to exit the United Methodist Church have no clear pathway out of the church. Some annual conferences, like South Carolina and South Georgia, have temporary mechanisms in place for churches that wish to depart. Other congregations will need to negotiate their way out if they wish to keep their properties.