

“Commission on a Way Forward” Updates

The 32-member Commission on a Way Forward was appointed by the Council of Bishops to assist the bishops in their charge from the 2016 General Conference to lead the church forward amid the present impasse related to human sexuality and resulting questions about the unity of the church.

All bishops have been asked to share the following:

- The mission of God through the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit trumps and guides everything
- The values of unity and contextualization for the sake of the mission undergird the work we are sharing and leading
- The Commission serves the Council [of Bishops, or COB], preparing the COB to fulfill its service to the General Conference in making a recommendation for the way forward
- To best serve the Council, the Commission did not express a preference of a model.
- In the same way, the Council is not now expressing a preference to allow the bishops to engage their conferences in teaching and dialogue.
- The values highlighted in any one model also live within the fabric of other models
- The Commission shared three sketches of models with the Council, with the awareness that we are not restricted to these models and are open to learning, listening and improvement.
- It is likely that additional models or sketches may emerge as the process continues
- Resident bishops were equipped to lead conversations through spiritual leadership in their episcopal areas.
- The values that are present in each model can be found in two important documents:
 1. The Mission, Vision and Scope document
 2. The Status Report of the Commission in July of 2017
- The key work going forward is:
 1. Ongoing conversation in episcopal areas
 2. Feedback from the COB and churches
 3. Continuing emphasis on prayer

The Three Sketches (Models)

1. Traditional Model - This model affirms the current BOD language and places a high value on accountability.
2. Centrist Model - This model removes restrictive language and places a high value on contextualization. It protects the rights of those whose conscience will not allow them to perform same gender weddings or ordain LGBTQ persons.
3. Unified Core Model - This model has one core that includes shared doctrine and services but creates different branches that have clearly defined values. These include:
 - a. Accountability
 - b. Contextualization
 - c. Justice

Each Model represents values that are within the COB and across the church and includes a gracious way for those who feel called to exit from the denomination.

Where do we go from here? (PDC)

- Study the text: “The Anatomy of Peace” (by the Arbinger Institute) and plan for study groups around the conference
- Saturday, February 3, 2018 - 10 am – 3 pm there will be a forum at Salisbury University in the building where the Commons Dining Hall is located (but on the second floor). Dr. Brian Polkinghorn, the director of the Bosserman Center for Conflict Resolution will be moderating the event. Folks will have conversation, give feedback to the Commission and learn how to have conversation with diverse opinions around the table. Lunch is “on your own” but can be purchased at the Commons below. Parking is at Asbury UMC.
- Saturday, April 28, 2018 from 1 pm until 4 pm there will be another opportunity for conversation at the Aldersgate UMC in Wilmington.
- Various conversation groups will be held throughout the spring using the “Anatomy of Peace” model and feedback will continue to be sent to the Commission
- Fall District Days with the bishop will include conversations about the model that will be going to General Conference 2019. (Sept. 10 Wilmington, Sept 11 Dover, Sept. 12 Easton, Sept. 13 Salisbury)
- Throughout there will be prayer!

Timeline for the process:

- Feb. 25- 28, 2018 the bishops are having an additional meeting of the COB in Dallas to discuss the models further
- April 29- May 4, 2018 is the last meeting of the COB in Chicago before the deadline for General Conference Documents to be prepared
- Special Called Session of General Conference – February 23- 26, 2019 in St. Louis, MO

Discussion Questions

1. What are the most important values and convictions to you in seeking a way forward?
2. What resources help us to tell the narratives of unity in seeking a way forward?
3. What are the core convictions of our faith as United Methodists?

The Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) In November gave an interim report to the Council of Bishops. A handbook for the bishops that was used by the Commission is now online:

<http://ow.ly/l3gq30haRJ9>

Official COWF website:

<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward>

Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/umcforward/>

Commission on a Way Forward: About Us

Mission

The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions. We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God, and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view. We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained; yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration. The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.

Vision

The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.

Scope

We should be open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality. Therefore, we should consider new ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions, in understandings of episcopacy, in contextual definitions of autonomy for annual conferences, and in the design and purpose of the apportionment. In reflection on the two matters of unity and human sexuality, we will fulfill our directive by considering “new forms and structures” of relationship and through the “complete examination and possible revision” of relevant paragraphs in the Book of Discipline. We will give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present connectionality, which is showing signs of brokenness. If we ignore this work, fracturing will occur in more haphazard and even self-interested ways across the church. If we do this work only to address our preferences and self-interest, we will fail to place our complete trust in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. If we do this work with complete surrender to God’s unlimited imagination and kingdom purposes, we will be blessed beyond our limited human imagination. God remains God; God is with us; God will never let us go. To God be the glory!