

The United Methodist Church: Governance and Structure

GOVERNANCE

United Methodists are sometimes asked where their church is headquartered, or what officer is “in charge.” Deliberately, The United Methodist Church has no single central office, no archbishop, no pope. This reflects the representative nature of the church's organization – which also provides a system of checks and balances. The church created a system that in some ways parallels that of the U.S. government when it came to America. The church has a General Conference, its legislative branch; a Council of Bishops, somewhat like an executive branch; and a nine-member Judicial Council, the judicial branch. It's helpful to recognize the structure of the church, but it is the mission, ministry and love of God through Jesus Christ that is of primary importance.

GENERAL CONFERENCE

Who makes decisions for The United Methodist Church if there is no one person in charge? Good question. The only body that can set official policy and speak for the denomination is the General Conference. The General Conference is an international body of nearly 1,000 delegates that meets every four years. The delegates are elected by annual conferences (at annual conference sessions) to attend General Conference. They represent all annual conferences around the world. Half of the delegates are laity (non-clergy members), half are clergy. Bishops attend the General Conference but cannot vote. Different bishops serve as presiding officers during the conference. Other bishops cannot speak unless permission is specifically granted by the delegates. During General Conference, delegates discuss and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. These actions result in a revision of the Book of Discipline, the denomination's book of law, and Book of Resolutions, policies of the denomination on



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current social issues. It is at General Conference where delegates wrestle with today's issues in light of scriptural teachings and the church's understanding of that teaching. Here is where the church's official stands and church policies are made regarding such issues as human sexuality, abortion, war and peace, as well as determination of ministries and funding. General Conferences are held in years divisible by 4, such as 2000, 2004, etc.

COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

The United Methodist Church uses an episcopal system of governance, which means bishops provide the top leadership. All bishops (active and retired) are members of the Council of Bishops, which is required to meet at least once a year. Bishops are directed to provide oversight of the entire church but have specific leadership responsibilities in a geographical area, called an episcopal area. An episcopal area is comprised of one or more annual conferences. There are 50 episcopal areas in the U.S. and 18 episcopal areas in the central conferences. Both men and women can be elected bishop. The only requirement to be elected bishop is that the person is an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. Bishops in the U.S. generally serve one area for eight years (two four-year terms) before they are assigned to another area. The Executive Secretary (a retired bishop serving a four-year term) is the chief operating officer for the council in their permanent, staffed office in Washington, D.C.

JUDICIAL COUNCIL

The Judicial Council is the highest judicial body or "court" of The United Methodist Church. Its nine members, comprised of both clergy and lay members, are elected by the General Conference for eight-year terms and receive no pay for their work. The five-to-four ratio of membership alternates every eight years between having a majority of clergy member and a majority of lay members.

The Judicial Council determines the constitutionality of acts or proposed acts of the General, Jurisdictional, Central, and Annual Conferences. It acts on these either on appeal of lower rulings or through requests for declaratory decisions. It also rules on whether acts of other official bodies of the denomination conform to The Book of Discipline. This is done in accordance with procedures established in The Book of

Discipline. When the Judicial Council makes its decision, it is final.

CONNECTIONAL TABLE

In 2004, the General Conference created a new structure called the Connectional Table to guide the work of the church. The Connectional Table, a place for collaboration, conversation and decision, is the first significant restructure for The United Methodist church since 1972. This body oversees the coordination of mission, ministries and resources across the denomination. The 47-member body consists of equal numbers of lay persons and clergy; female and male, including at least 10 percent youth and young adults; at least 30 percent members of racial-ethnic minority groups, and no fewer than seven members from The United Methodist Church in Europe, Africa and Asia. It also includes bishops and staff executives and officers of denominational agencies. Top executives of the general boards and agencies have the right to speak but cannot vote.

Guidelines for Holy Conferencing What God Expects of Us

Colossians 3:12-16a,17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.

- Every person is a child of God. Always speak respectfully. One can disagree without being disagreeable.
- As you patiently listen and observe the behavior of others, be open to the possibility that God can change the views of any or all parties in the discussion.
- Listen patiently before formulating responses.
- Strive to understand the experience out of which others have arrived at their views.
- Be careful in how you express personal offense at differing opinions. Otherwise dialogue may be inhibited.
- Accurately reflect the views of others when speaking. This is especially important when you disagree with that position.
- Avoid using inflammatory words, derogatory names, or an excited and angry voice.
- Avoid making generalizations about individuals and groups. Make your point with specific evidence and examples.
- Make use of facilitators and mediators.
- Remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God – not by the flaws we discover, or think we discover, in their views and actions.

We believe Christians can discuss important issues without the acrimonious debate and parliamentary maneuvering that can divide a group into contending factions. We see too many examples of that in secular society. We believe the Holy Spirit leads in all things, especially as we make decisions. We want to avoid making decisions in a fashion that leaves some feeling like winners and others like losers.

We can change the world through honest conversation on matters about which we are

passionate.

Becoming a General Conference Delegate

Personal Attributes

1. Prayer—Seek guidance through your own prayers and prayers of others.
2. Visibility - Be present at district and conference events to learn to know people and to let them know you and your willingness to serve as a delegate to General Conference.
3. Support—Secure endorsement in a manner that will be agreed upon by as large support group as possible. Sometimes many women seek the same votes and eliminate each other in the competition.
4. Integrity—Be true to your own theological understandings and positions on issues, but open to listening to others.
5. Informed—Learn as much as you can about the church structure, issues, resolutions, and political dynamics within the church.
6. Inclusive—Be an advocate for inclusiveness in all of its aspects among delegates. Be sensitive to language used in resolutions that may be racist or exclusive.
7. Responsive—Respond to inquiries about your position on issues by acknowledging you have certain views but will listen to the debates and discussions in a process of discernment.
8. Commit—Commit to researching all sides of an issue.

The Election Process

Lay delegates to the General are also delegates to their jurisdictional conferences. Lay delegates are elected by the lay members of their annual conference. They "shall have been professing members of The United Methodist Church for at least two years next preceding their election and shall have been active participants in The United Methodist Church for at least four years next preceding their election and are members thereof within the annual conference electing them at the time of holding the General and jurisdictional or central conferences." (Paragraph 36. Article V. of the DISCIPLINE)

The number of clergy and lay delegates for each annual conference is determined by the formula based on number of clergy and the number of professing members in the annual conferences, the ratio of which is set by General Conference (Paragraph 15 of the DISCIPLINE) and (Paragraph 502.3a, b).

"At least thirty days prior to the beginning of the calendar year (preceding the session of the General Conference), the General Secretary of General Conference shall notify

the bishop and the secretary of each annual conference of the number of delegates to be elected by that annual conference” (Paragraph 502.4).

Each annual conference can determine its nominating process. Thus, a variety of ways are used to nominate persons for ele