

## **An Opportunity to Take a Fresh Look at the Connectional Conference Plan**

*Last October, I presented an overview of the [Connectional Conference Plan](#) to South Central Jurisdiction delegates at a gathering that was held to help them prepare for the 2019 Special Session of General Conference. Although many attending that meeting arrived assuming the Connectional Conference Plan would not get any traction at General Conference, I was surprised and intrigued by how many were more open to the plan's potential as they began to better understand it. That experience has stayed with me, as has the reality of our increasing polarization around the One Church and Traditional Plans. Recently, the Commission on a Way Forward moderators issued a letter inviting the church into a deeper discussion about the Connectional Conference Plan. I share this reflection in response to that invitation, out of my concern about our deepening polarization and because the Connectional Conference Plan offers a creative way forward for the entire United Methodist Church that has not yet been fully explored. It is my hope that delegates will embrace the opportunity they have between now and General Conference to take a fresh look at the Connectional Conference Plan and include it in their continuing discernment about God's Way Forward for the entire United Methodist Church. Bishop Gary E. Mueller*

### **What Happened to the Connectional Conference Plan?**

The Commission on a Way Forward has given The United Methodist Church the gift of demonstrating how difficult issues can be addressed with respect, integrity and Christian love. Through a process filled with unexpected twists and turns, the Commission has offered three distinct options for the 2019 General Conference to consider: The One Church Plan, The Connectional Conference Plan and the Traditional Plan.

However, these three options quickly were reduced to two as a consensus developed that the Connectional Conference Plan would be dead on arrival at General Conference because it seems to have too many moving parts, involves too much change, requires too many constitutional amendments and envisions too different a future. In other words, it was perceived as too complicated – complex and complicated! The result? For all practical purposes, many General Conference delegates feel as if their only option is to choose between the One Church Plan that changes the church's stance on human sexuality and the Traditional Plan that strengthens it.

The disappearance of the Connectional Conference Plan from serious consideration is a lost opportunity for The United Methodist Church. In part, because it completely ignores a highly innovative part of the Commission's work that has been carefully and prayerfully prepared. But just as importantly, because it has resulted in increased polarization arising from the fact that there are now effectively only two very different options from which to choose. We are experiencing the result of this throughout the church. Our hearts are increasingly at war at the very time we need hearts of peace. Rhetoric is becoming increasingly strident, as more voices from both ends of the theological spectrum are indicating they feel

as if their only viable option is ‘fight-or-flight’. And perhaps most powerfully and painfully, The United Methodist Church is increasingly looking like every other historic mainline denomination that already has traveled this road: the winners stay, the losers leave and the church that remains is far less vibrant.

No wonder so many in our church are disheartened at the possibility of finding a way forward for the entire United Methodist Church. It’s not because we don’t desire it; we do. It’s not because we’re not trying to make it a reality; we are. It’s because we have ensnared ourselves in a trap of a church-dividing vote that will result in winners and losers, with nobody really winning and everybody actually losing. This reality - difficult and painful though it may be - provides an important opportunity for General Conference delegates to take a fresh look at the Connectional Conference Plan.

## **The Heart and Soul of the Connectional Conference Plan**

While it is understandable why people are wary of a plan that offers a brand new way of conceiving The United Methodist Church, the Connectional Conference Plan is not nearly as complex or complicated as has been assumed. In fact, six fairly simple concepts embody the heart and soul of the Connectional Conference Plan and paint a picture of the future it envisions. These concepts are important because they reflect six key foundational ideas contained in the [“Mission, Vision and Scope”](#) document the Council of Bishops developed to guide the Commission on a Way Forward in its work.

### **Key Concept #1 – The Connectional Conference Plan embraces a different assumption, diagnosis and prescription for the issues with which The United Methodist Church is wrestling.**

The ‘Mission’ section of the “Mission, Vision and Scope” document significantly reframes the discussion the church is having about human sexuality by stating,

*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 Traditional Plan’s diagnosis is that the church is unable to enforce what it has decided and its prescription is enhanced enforcement mechanisms. The One Church Plan’s diagnosis is that human sexuality is not a church-dividing issue and its prescription is to force everyone to live in a big tent by offering ‘protection’ to those who disagree with the church’s new stance concerning marriage and ordination.

The Connectional Conference Plan starts with the assumption that The United Methodist Church’s long-standing difference of opinion concerning human sexuality is not a problem to be solved or even an issue to be managed. Rather, it is the presenting issue for the radically differing theological perspectives that will not go away, cannot be ignored and very well may increase. This assumption results in its diagnosis that The United Methodist Church cannot continue to address this reality as we’ve done in the past, because our old solutions of taking a vote to see who wins or finding ‘workarounds’ to hold together the institution are simply inadequate and doomed to fail. In turn, this diagnosis leads to the

Connectional Conference Plan's prescription that the best way forward is to adapt to this new reality by approaching unity, connectionalism and structure in ways so significantly different from our current approach that they appear to turn everything upside down and inside out – all at the same time.

**Key Concept #2 – The Connectional Conference Plan offers a new vision of unity for the entire United Methodist Church.**

The 'Scope' section of the "Mission, Vision and Scope" document states that the best way forward will include being,

*...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.*

It's not surprising that many people are questioning whether it's worth pursuing any form of unity since the only choice seems to be between two diametrically opposed visions of the future. They wonder whether it might be wise to accept the inevitable and let everyone gravitate where they feel most comfortable. While this conclusion is understandable, it is also contrary to who we are.

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that Jesus calls us to live in unity, even if we sometimes struggle to live it out. Church history demonstrates how often divisions occur because sinful human beings are focused on prevailing in the church, instead of living as part of the Body of Christ. Our Wesleyan DNA is so inherently connectional in nature that we must be connected, even when current forms of connectionalism are not working. The Christian witness is diminished, if not negated, when we talk about the transformative power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and yet have not been transformed ourselves.

The issue at hand is exactly what constitutes unity. The Commission's three plans offer three distinctive understandings of Christian unity. While it is critical to understand what each is and evaluate how each impacts the entire United Methodist Church, it cannot be said enough that those who support each of these different perspectives do so with integrity and from a deep faith understanding.

The Traditional Plan's understanding of unity is directly related to its assumption that matters of human sexuality are doctrinal in nature and therefore cannot be compromised. The plan believes unity is best achieved by clarifying The United Methodist Church's stance prohibiting the ordination and marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals, and implementing significant enforcement measures to ensure that bishops, clergy and Annual Conferences uphold it. Unity exists for those who share the same convictions and are willing to live by them. What remains unaddressed by the Traditional Plan, however, is what happens to those who disagree, how the enforcement mechanisms will work and whether the church will continue to be more focused on matters of human sexuality than anything else.

The One Church Plan's understanding of unity stems from its assumption that matters of human sexuality are not doctrinal in nature and therefore people can live together in the same 'big tent' – even if they don't want to be part of it. The plan contends that unity is best achieved by changing the church's

stance concerning matters of human sexuality to make room for everyone, and then offering protection for those who disagree by not compelling any pastor or bishop to act contrary to her or his conscience and allowing congregations to decide whom may be married in their sanctuaries. However in spite of its name and aspirational hopes, what remains unaddressed by the One Church Plan is whether those who disagree actually will stay, how those who are protected will be treated as equals in Christ and not merely tolerated as a problem to be managed, and what will happen in the face of continuing efforts to seek mandatory ordination and marriage for self-avowed practicing homosexuals.

In contrast, the Connectional Conference Plan's understanding of unity emerges from John 15: Jesus is the vine and we are unique branches connected to each other through him.

This understanding enables the church to begin to live out a new expression of unity that is not imposed legislatively by forcing or enforcing it, not based primarily on uniformity of belief and not focused on preserving as much of the current institution of The United Methodist Church as possible. Instead, it begins with a common faith in Christ, is entered into freely and continues to grow in the coming years through what we share in common: a changed connection and deepening relationships.

This happens in very concrete ways. A core of shared essentials that historically have connected United Methodists continues to bind us together. The three theologically differentiated Connectional Conferences help us overcome the tension and conflict that has diminished our unity. Unity has the opportunity to grow in the coming years when there no longer is a need to 'win' a battle of belief and we find common ground for working together.

**Key Concept #3 – The Connectional Conference Plan reframes connectionalism so that the entire United Methodist Church actually can stay connected and grow into deeper authentic unity.**

The 'Scope' section of the "Mission, Vision and Scope" documents states that any way forward for the United Methodist Church will have to,

*...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.*

The Traditional Plan offers little in the way of any new connectionalism outside of allowing congregations to more easily leave the connection. The One Church Plan offers greater flexibility to Annual Conference Boards of Ordained Ministry, the Clergy Session and local congregations concerning how to approach the ordination and marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. Beyond this, however, it offers virtually no other change.

In contrast, the Connectional Conference Plan offers a significantly reframed connectionalism suitable for a significantly changed church and world. Most notably, it does this by directly addressing the reality of the church's current division involving human sexuality by creating three theologically identified Connectional Conferences. These three Connectional Conferences will replace the current Jurisdictional

Conferences and will have broad authority to define their distinctive theological perspectives and definitions of accountability, contextualization and justice. Central Conferences will have the option of becoming geographical Connectional Conferences or aligning with one of the three Connectional Conferences originating in the United States.

The **Progressive Connectional Conference** will mandate full inclusion for LGBTQ persons in every aspect of the church's life. The **Traditional Connectional Conference** will continue the *Discipline's* current standards concerning self-avowed practicing homosexuals and includes a covenantal commitment to a more traditional understanding of doctrine. The **Unity Connectional Conference** will maintain that members are not of one mind regarding biblical interpretations related to human sexuality, will allow but not mandate weddings and ordinations for self-avowed practicing homosexuals, and will ensure that no bishop, pastor or congregation is required to act against conscience in these matters. It will be able to do this in a stable way for a broad array of United Methodists because the existence of healthy Progressive and Traditional Connectional Conferences means its ongoing identity will not be primarily focused on changing or enforcing the church's stance concerning matters of human sexuality.

Concern has been expressed that the creation of the three theologically based Connectional Conferences is strikingly similar to the insidious and sinful 1939 formation of the Central Jurisdiction that purposely isolated African-Americans within The United Methodist Church so they were not full and equal participants. While the fear that segregating people into different conferences will destroy unity is a valid concern, there are substantive differences between the Jurisdictional Conference of 1939 and the Connectional Conferences of 2019. The three Connectional Conferences are not forced upon persons because of who they are, but are freely joined, so that each includes individuals of different ages, gender, ethnicities and geographical locations. Just as importantly, our understanding of what makes for unity is radically different now than 80 years ago. Unity no longer can be defined in terms of forced or enforced uniformity of belief, but as something that occurs because people freely choose to be part of a church that creates both safe spaces for theological perspectives and a way to remain connected with others around core shared beliefs, structures and relationships.

**Key Concept #4 – The Connectional Conference Plan institutes far-reaching structural change that will position the entire United Methodist Church for more fruitful ministry in the future.**

The 'Scope' section of the "Mission, Vision and Scope" document states that The United Methodist Church's way forward needs to,

*...give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present connectionality.*

Neither the One Church or Traditional plans focus on offering the significant, far-ranging and adaptive reformation our church requires because they assume much of the current institutional and structural status quo of The United Methodist Church.

The Connectional Conference Plan, however, seeks to implement needed adaptive change in two important ways. In the first place, it significantly changes the roles of General Conference, *The Book of Discipline*, the Judicial Council, the Council of Bishops and general agencies. In the second, the plan gives each Connectional Conference the right to create its own *Book of Discipline*, as well as its own structure, agencies, method of financing ministry, shared services, policies regarding weddings and standards for ministerial credentialing in order to express its theological convictions and reach the mission field in contextually appropriate ways. This new way of being a church allows a looser connection instead of imposed disciplinary requirement that will be embraced by a younger generation that values diversity, flexibility and relationships.

**Key Concept #5 – The Connectional Conference Plan offers the transparency, involvement in decision-making and intentional implementation that is necessary if unity is to become a reality for the entire United Methodist Church.**

The ‘Scope’ section of the “Mission, Vision and Scope” document offers an astute observation that should impact how The United Methodist Church moves forward,

*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.*

Laiety and clergy will respond to whatever decision General Conference makes. The issue is whether this response will be reactive and chaotic or intentional and orderly.

There is a high likelihood that both the One Church and Traditional plans will result in highly reactive responses. The Traditional Plan offers virtually no opportunity for formal involvement by individuals, Annual Conferences or congregations, although it offers a ‘gracious exit’ for churches that cannot remain in the denomination for reasons of conscience. The One Church Plan excludes all but a few laity from decisions about whether to commission and ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals. The one way congregations can participate formally is in deciding whether same-gender weddings can be performed in their sanctuaries, and this decision point is potentially the most painful and difficult for laity and clergy, especially when there is lack of agreement within the congregation.

The Connectional Conference Plan, on the other hand, understands that any way forward will take a great deal of intentional effort. In fact, that is exactly why it requires the passage of nine Constitutional Amendments, takes several years to implement and involves a number of sequential actions and formal votes by targeted dates. This is not a weakness. It is exactly what is needed for the entire United Methodist Church to claim our way forward. While this full involvement may take more effort in the short-term, it will bear fruit in the long-term.

Since the Connectional Conference Plan offers people the opportunity to be involved in charting their future rather than having it imposed upon them, the result will be far healthier. First and primarily, each Jurisdictional Conference and Central Conference will decide which Connectional Conference the Annual

Conferences and congregations within it will join. Second, bishops will choose which Connectional Conference to join. Third, Annual Conferences, congregations, laity, clergy and institutions will potentially have the option to choose, depending upon the choice their Annual Conference or church makes. This is spelled out in the plan's implementation:

#### **2019**

- Special Session of General Conference approves the Plan and legislation
- Annual Conferences vote on Constitutional Amendments by 4/14/2020

#### **2020**

- General Conference meets
- Jurisdictional and Central Conferences vote to choose their Connectional Conference

#### **2021**

- Annual Conferences that disagree with their Jurisdictional Conference's Connectional Conference choice vote to join another Connectional Conference by 8/1/2021
- Bishops align with a Connectional Conference by 8/1/2021
- Active Bishops in each Connectional Conference meet with the Transition Team to begin organizing Connectional Conferences beginning 9/1/2021

#### **2022**

- Local congregations disagreeing with their Annual Conference's Connectional Conference choice vote to join another Connectional Conference by deadline: 7/1/2022
- Connectional Conferences hold organizational conferences during fall

#### **2025**

- General Conference meets (replaces 2024 General Conference)
- Connectional Conferences meet following General Conference

While the One Church and Traditional plans require simple majority votes at General Conference, the Connectional Conference Plan requires a two-thirds vote by both General Conference and the Annual Conferences since it includes constitutional amendments. This offers an important possibility for the church to move forward in unity. What is more, it offers The United Methodist Church the opportunity to model through the power of the Holy Spirit how unity rather than polarization and fracturing is a viable option for the future.

**Key Concept #6 – The Connectional Conference Plan provides the best hope for the entire United Methodist Church to experience an authentic, deeper and growing unity that will unleash us to carry out our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for God's transformation of the world.**

The 'Vision' section in the "Vision, Mission and Scope" document shares a powerful challenge about the best way forward,

*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.*

Both the One Church and the Traditional plans could well result in essentially the same outcome: many who currently are part of the church will effectively be excluded, and the result will be a church with a far narrower focus and a greatly diminished ability to reach a very diverse world with the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Connectional Conference Plan enables those who self-identify as the broad ‘heart of Methodism’, as well as traditionalists and progressives, to live out of their faith perspective without worrying whether others are going to try to force them to change. This is not only true now concerning matters of human sexuality, it also extends to the myriad of issues that will arise in the years to come. Such clarity will allow all three connectional conferences to mobilize in the multitude of different contexts across the globe undistracted by constant fighting over differences in theology and moral teaching. In other words, the Connectional Conference Plan offers the best hope of actually accomplishing what we say we want to accomplish.

### **Honest Talk about the Connectional Conference Plan’s Impact**

The United Methodist Church will be very different when General Conference adjourns on February 26, 2019. This is true regardless of which plan is selected. It is also true if nothing happens. Although not every detail can be foreseen, it is important to be transparent about those aspects of the Connectional Conference Plan’s impact that can be anticipated.

**Laity and Congregations** The impact on laity depends on several factors. If a layperson agrees with how her or his congregation formally responds to the decision made by her or his Annual Conference, there could be little impact. However, if she or he disagrees, there could be significant impact that includes leaving that congregation for another. The more homogeneous a congregation, the less likely a church will be impacted. But in more diverse congregations, relationships may be disrupted as individuals choose congregations in different Connectional Conferences.

**Clergy** In a similar fashion, the impact upon local pastors, deacons and elders will depend upon how the clergyperson responds to the formal response of her or his Annual Conference. If in agreement, she or he will not have to change, although colleagues may well choose another Connectional Conference. While all three Connectional Conferences will recognize ordination performed in any Connectional Conference, an individual’s ability to serve would be determined by the qualifications set by each Connectional Conference. Since Annual Conference boundaries may be impacted, elders could find themselves in a very different looking Annual Conference. In similar ways, deacons could be impacted as they seek to carry out their calling. In the midst of all of this, one of the greatest challenges will be for

the Connectional Conferences to ensure that persons historically protected by the guaranteed appointment, particularly women and ethnic minorities, would retain those protections.

**Bishops** Each active and retired bishop must choose a Connectional Conference to join. Bishops' membership would move from the Council of Bishops to the College of Bishops in their Connectional Conference. This is where oversight and accountability will be lodged. Bishops elected after 2020 would have tenure determined by their Connectional Conference. Connectional Conferences in the United States would fund their own bishops at comparable levels through the General Council on Finance and Administration. The three theologically defined Connectional Conferences will continue to fund bishops outside the United States.

**Annual Conferences** Annual Conferences no longer will be primarily geographical, but defined by their relationship with a Connectional Conference. While this could more clearly define the identity of the Annual Conference, it will likely lead to the redrawing of many Annual Conference boundaries.

**Central Conferences** Each Central Conference will choose to become its own Connectional Conference or join the Progressive, Traditional or Unity Connectional Conference.

**General Church Bodies** The authority of **General Conference** will be redefined and limited to include oversight over *The General Book of Discipline*, shared doctrine, continuing general agencies and Connectional Conference justice ministries; it will also serve as a venue for connecting the Connectional Conferences, worship, sharing of best practices, inspiration and building unity. The **Council of Bishops** will refocus its work to provide a venue for ecumenical relationships, serve as a learning, equipping and nurturing community and uphold the Wesleyan focus on justice, inclusiveness and The United Methodist Church's historic protections as outlined in the 1968 Plan of Union. The **Judicial Council** will have authority over matters decided by General Conference or involving the Constitution. Each Connectional Conference can create Connectional Judicial Council for matters related to its *Book of Discipline*. The United Methodist Church would have five jointly funded **General Agencies**: Wespeth, General Council on Finance and Administration, the Publishing House, parts of the General Board of Global Ministries including the United Methodist Committee on Relief and Archives and History that will offer shared services to the entire United Methodist Church. All other current general agencies will continue through 2025, with a task force proposing a new model for how they can serve those Connectional Conferences that desire to collaborate with them in the future.

**Justice Ministries** Connectional Conferences will engage in justice ministries, especially involving sexism and racism. General Conference will hold them accountable for their desired outcomes.

**Institutions** Property owned by an Annual Conference will follow the Annual Conference into its Connectional Conference. Jurisdictional entities will follow the Jurisdiction. Colleges and universities, camps, and health and welfare agencies can choose to relate to one or more Annual Conferences in multiple Connectional Conferences.

**Finances and Pensions** All medical and pension liabilities will remain the legal obligations of the Annual Conference, regardless of which Connectional Conference the Annual Conference chooses. Wespath will extend its coverage to all Connectional Conferences, and will have the authority to reassign pension liabilities based on local church and active and retired clergy Connectional Conference affiliation.

## **8 Takeaways from a Fresh Look at the Connectional Conference Plan**

What is important to remember about the Connectional Conference Plan in these weeks prior to General Conference as delegates continue to discern the best way forward? While it contains much that is rich, robust and challenging, eight takeaways seem most relevant.

1. The Connectional Conference Plan frees the church from the trap of dividing up into winners and losers by offering a brand new way forward for the entire United Methodist Church.
2. The Connectional Conference Plan recognizes the depth of the theological division that exists within The United Methodist Church and creates three distinctive Connectional Conferences that incorporate this division as a strength for our future.
3. The Connectional Conference Plan understands that unity is best expressed by the vine and branch imagery of John 15. It does not seek to force unity by mandating protections for those who disagree with the church's stance on matters of human sexuality or enforcing it through disciplinary measures. Instead, it envisions a new unity growing out a common relationship with Christ, core theological beliefs, shared agencies and the conviction that unity can deepen when people no longer feel as if they must win doctrinal battles.
4. The Connectional Conference Plan utilizes a long-needed adaptive approach that will have a positive impact for decades to come because it redefines the work of General Conference, Annual conferences, ordained ministry, itinerancy, the episcopacy and general agencies.
5. The Connectional Conference Plan increases The United Methodist Church's total impact around the world because each Connectional Conference is very clear about who it is and whom it can reach.
6. The Connectional Conference Plan provides the best opportunity for including the 'heart of Methodism' that feels as if the 'edges' are so dividing the church it leaves no place for them.
7. The Connectional Conference Plan most fully embodies the "Mission, Vision and Scope" document developed by the Council of Bishops to guide the Commission on a Way Forward by including the two things that must be found in any way forward: ensuring room for theological integrity for all persons **and** creating a new form of unity that grows out of a reframed connectionalism.

8. The Connectional Conference Plan offers The United Methodist Church the holy opportunity to demonstrate how a relationship to each other through Christ can enable the church to transcend polarizing differences instead of being fractured by them.

Which of the three plans offered by the Commission on a Way Forward is the best way forward for the entire United Methodist Church? The answer to that question ultimately depends upon the movement of the Holy Spirit and the discernment of General Conference delegates. However, there is far too much at stake to ignore the Connectional Conference Plan simply because it is assumed to be too difficult to adopt or implement. Its creative offering of a way forward and vision of what The United Methodist Church can be in the coming years is worthy of study, reflection and holy conversation. Hopefully delegates are ready in these weeks leading up to General Conference to take a fresh look at it as they continue to discern God's Way Forward for the entire United Methodist Church.