



## A crucial time for the UMC

At the end of this week, a called meeting of General Conference, the United Methodist Church's top decision-making body, may have a huge impact on the UMC for good or for ill. In case you're UM and aren't yet aware of what's about to happen, or you're not UM but want to know, I'm offering some thoughts about it here.



General Conference (GC) is the worldwide decision-making body of the UMC. Its regular meetings happen only once every four years and last nearly two weeks, meeting day and night. It is the only body with authority to make changes in the UMC *Book of Discipline*, which contains all official UMC doctrines, policies, and rules.

Delegates to GC are elected by Annual Conferences (U.S. regional decision-making bodies) and Central Conferences (regional UMC bodies elsewhere in the world). All clergy belong to one of these, and each has as many lay members as clergy, elected by local congregations. The number of GC delegates to which each AC or CC is entitled is based on its membership numbers. However, membership is not counted as strictly in some other countries (especially in Africa) as in the U.S.



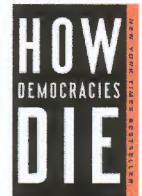
At the 2016 GC, discussion about the UMC's policy regarding homosexuality became so heated that it was halted and postponed to be dealt with later. That controversial topic (and only that topic) will now be addressed this week at a called four-day GC in St. Louis.

## Debated for forty-seven years

Although the *Discipline* says that "sexuality is God's good gift to all persons," it also says that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching" (meaning that it is a sin). It says that "self-

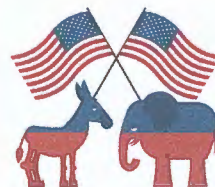
## A crucial time for the U.S.?

Is U.S. democracy dying? In *How Democracies Die* (Broadway Books, 2018), Harvard government professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt warn that it may be.



They emphasize the importance of identifying authoritarians before being able to keep them out, and they point out four "behavioral warning signs" for which we as citizens need to be alert. "We should worry," Levitsky and Ziblatt tell us, "when a politician rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game; denies the legitimacy of opponents; tolerates or encourages violence; or indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media."

"Unlike democratic leaders, autocrats are intolerant of criticism and are ready to use their power to punish those—in the opposition, media, or civil society—who criticize them," Levitsky and Daniel find, and they see this characteristic clearly in our current president. In fact, "Trump, even before his inauguration," these authors observe, "tested positive on all four measures on our litmus test for autocrats."



Levitsky and Daniel find that political parties are democracy's gatekeepers. They must strike a balance between choosing the candidates that best represent the party's voters, and screening out those who pose a threat to democracy or are otherwise unfit to hold office. When parties fail to accomplish this, as our parties currently have, we're in danger.

I urge you to read this intriguing and helpful book.



avowed, practicing homosexuals” cannot be ordained as UMC clergy, and that same-sex unions cannot be performed in UMC sanctuaries or by UMC clergy in any setting. This topic was openly debated first at the GC of 1972, and it has been the subject of heated discussion at every GC since then, with removal of these policies proposed but rejected each time.



The Council of Bishops (all active UMC bishops) has appointed a “Commission on a Way Forward” (CWF) to deal with this issue, presumably to avoid disrupting the unity of the UMC. The CWF’s thirty-two lay and clergy members, from all over the world, were to develop a proposal to be considered possibly by a called GC, which is now happening this month. However, the CWF has now been meeting regularly since 2016, but they couldn’t agree on “a proposal” so they have submitted three proposals. Then some changes were made in these by the UMC Judicial Council (analogous to the Supreme Court) in order to bring them all into conformity with the UMC constitution.



### Three main proposed plans

Each of the three plans is complicated, so I won’t try to describe them fully. But basically, the Traditional Plan leaves the homosexuality language as it now is but strengthens the provisions for enforcing it. The One Church Plan, which seems to be favored by most members of the CWF and most bishops, removes most of the language but allows for Annual Conferences to decide what policy their pastors and congregations will follow. Its supporters seem to see it as a compromise that will make needed changes without driving away traditionalists, many of whom are in African countries in which homosexuality is a crime. The Conference Plan provides for different Conferences based on which policy each chooses to follow.



In addition, other UMC members have proposed the Simple Plan, which simply removes all language about homosexuality. It includes no apology for past LGBT exclusion, but to me, while it may not be ideal it’s the only plan that seems at all reasonable and just. Votes for it, however, like third-party votes in a U.S. presidential election, could have the unintended effect of helping the the least desirable

plan—the Traditional Plan—to win, so they’re probably unwise.



If the UMC should split at this GC, that could have unwanted effects on practical, financial matters such as clergy salaries and pensions and support of church-supported institutions such as hospitals and colleges. And if nothing should change, the cost of travel and lodging for about a thousand people to attend GC would have essentially been wasted. So this week’s GC can have both spiritual and material results.

### Advocates for each plan

Several unofficial groups of UMC members are very actively working for adoption of the plan they prefer. Supporters of the Traditionalist plan include several groups of many years’ standing: Good News, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, and the Confessing Movement.



Also, a recently formed group, the Wesleyan Covenant Association, is actively supporting a traditionalist position. In fact, this group, which includes some bishops, seems poised to leave the UMC (taking church property with them, if possible) if GC doesn’t go their way, or maybe even if it does.

Active on the other side of the LGBT issue are the Methodist Federation for Social Action, the Reconciling Ministries Network, Love Wins, and the Love Your Neighbor Coalition.



### A parliamentary nightmare

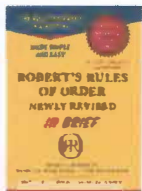
There are 864 delegates to this month’s GC. They apparently will not be divided into committees as GC usually is, but will function as a committee of the whole. The first of the four days of the GC (Feb. 23) will be devoted to corporate worship and prayer, with only the remaining three days used for official decision-making. The delegates have several different native languages, into which all proceedings and printed advance materials must be translated. Many—maybe all—delegates will have very strong opinions, which many will see as God’s opinions. *Robert’s Rules of Order* will control how the GC operates. To me, this mixture seems like a recipe for a parliamentary nightmare.



In addition, many of the delegates are very experienced and are knowl-



edgeable about the inner workings of the UMC, about UMC politics and where the power is, and about the fine points of *Robert's Rules*. Yet other delegates often depend on more knowledgeable delegates to explain what's happening and advise them how to vote.



## Sources for information and views

You can find full information and a variety of opinions about the coming GC in several places on the web. I suggest [www.umc.org/GC2019](http://www.umc.org/GC2019), the official UMC website and [www.umnews.org](http://www.umnews.org), the official news-gathering agency of the UMC. Also helpful is [www.um-insight.net](http://www.um-insight.net), an independent site that continually presents a variety of views in addition to information.



If you're stalwart enough to want to watch the actual General Conference proceedings from February 24 through 26, you can watch them live at [www.umc.org/live](http://www.umc.org/live). And the giant book (the *Advance Daily Christian Advocate*) that contains GC rules, delegates' names, and "petitions" (proposals for change in the *Discipline*) that have been submitted in advance is available at [http://cdnfiles.umc.org/Website\\_Properties/general-conference/2019/documents/general-conference-2019-adca-english.pdf](http://cdnfiles.umc.org/Website_Properties/general-conference/2019/documents/general-conference-2019-adca-english.pdf).

## Why not give up and drop out?

I saw this asked by someone on Facebook recently, and given what's currently happening in the UMC, it may be a reasonable question. Seeing it asked in this way made me rethink—for the umpteenth time—my personal answer to it. It also made me rethink what I see as the pros and cons of dropping out versus staying in, when church actions seem unsupportable.



When I think about staying in versus dropping out, I keep coming back to a statement by author Joan Chittister: "There may come a time when you have to leave the church to save your soul, but if you leave, don't leave quietly, and if you stay, don't stay quietly." That time seems to have come or at least to be coming soon for many United Methodists. If you're one of those, I hope you'll become informed and then speak up and keep speaking up about why you're choosing the route you're choosing. That kind of speaking is what I'm continually trying to do in *Connections*.



## I stayed for seventy-five years

For seventy-five years I stayed. For the first forty of those, I kept quiet, did whatever the church said I should do, tried to believe what everyone in it seemed to believe, and assumed that whatever of that didn't make sense to me meant that I was wrong. But finally I realized that I wasn't always wrong. I realized I needed to investigate, ask questions, and then speak up about what I found.



As a result, several years ago I stopped participating in the local congregation that I've been active in for more than fifty years. I'm still on its roll, and I'm not participating in any other congregation. As a lifelong Methodist, I still care greatly about the UMC and am still contributing financially to some of its agencies and related organizations. However, I'm no longer attending my local congregation's activities or financially contributing to it regularly, despite having done that faithfully for so many years.

## Worn out with being angry

I know many other longtime UMC members who have made similar changes. Those members

This issue, all back issues, a list of books I've written about, and other *Connections*-related information are available free from my website, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). I no longer send new issues of *Connections* by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.



I'm a lifelong lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

even include some UMC pastors. Why? I can't answer for the rest of these dropouts, but for me there have been several reasons.

I was angry by the end of every worship service. I was angry about being expected to sing and recite claims that I found unbelievable, that contradict what is now known about the universe, about human beings, and about so much else in the natural world. I was worn out with hearing the earth described as flat, hearing about a virgin having given birth, and hearing God described as a Santa-Claus-like man in the sky. I was worn out with hearing all human beings referred to as male, in prayers, hymns, and creeds.



I was tired, too, of being expected to sing and recite statements in King-James-style 16th-century words. What century does the church think we're living in, I kept wondering. I was also sick of hearing Christianity equated with Americanism and even militarism.

Above all, I was tired of seeing so few other church members willing to learn anything new about their faith or change any of their beliefs from what they had been told during childhood. To me, that kind of change seemed like an important part of maturing as a person and a Christian.

## Life-changing experiences

When I stopped participating in my local congregation, I had been thinking and reading and learning new religion-related things for several years, and I was finding that exciting. Beyond my local church, I'd been discovering new people who had turned out to be kindred spirits of mine. These changes had made Christianity start making sense to me. It had started making me want to try to follow "the way" of Jesus to an extent that I had never felt before. All of this was such an exhilarating, eye-opening experience for me—probably the most exhilarating of my life—that I wanted my church friends to appreciate what had happened.



## My congregation saw it as negative

However, instead of sharing my enthusiasm for what I was experiencing, almost none of my fellow church members seemed to care about it. Or else, the way in which they cared was by coming to see me as no longer a Christian and no longer entitled to represent them in the church decision-making

bodies that I had enjoyed being part of. One of our pastors even told me she had been ordered to have no further contact with me.

## More justice and more credibility

I've come to feel that two kinds of major change are essential for the church if it is to survive. One of these is to more actively pursue its God-given purpose, which I understand to be promoting justice and compassion in the world, as Jesus advocated and demonstrated. Currently the most urgent part of making this change would be to stop discriminating against people who are not heterosexual. So I hope that this week's UMC General Conference will take the necessary steps to do this.

Besides seeing an urgent need for the UMC to work more daringly for justice—putting love into action—I also see a pressing need for change in another aspect of the UMC: its credibility. I don't think we can expect new people to join us or even expect many existing members to stay, if we don't quickly make our language and our official beliefs consistent with what has now been learned from the sciences and other branches of knowledge, as well as with what has been learned from today's wide contact with the world outside of our own churches, families, and communities.



Maybe the UMC will make changes soon in the direction of increasing its active opposition to injustice, but I see very, very few efforts at increasing UMC credibility. I don't even see much recognition of the need for it, yet I see the need as urgent.

## Will the UMC change this week?

I hope that, beginning at this month's UMC General Conference, the UMC will acknowledge LGBT people as being totally welcome within the church and society. How can we have taken so long to see the need for this? We did the same thing for years with regard to slavery, racial segregation, and requiring women to be second-class citizens and church members. We haven't totally remedied those yet, but at least we've seen the need and started working toward change. It's far past time now to also recognize and stop the cruelty that is being inflicted on LGBT people by the UMC.



Will the change brought by this week's GC be for better or for worse? I'm hoping for the best!

*Barbara*