

## General Conference aftermath

If you're not a United Methodist (or maybe even if you are one), you may feel that you can't bear to hear any more about the UMC General Conference (GC) that met in February and I wrote about in the February *Connections*. However, this GC has had a huge impact on the UMC, and its results are still being widely and heatedly discussed, so I'm writing about it again.



### A way backward

Its delegates voted 53% to 47% to adopt the proposed Traditional Plan, with most of the favorable votes coming from Africa and elsewhere outside the U.S. This plan preserves the UMC's policy that calls homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching," forbids "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" from being ordained as UMC clergy, and forbids same-sex weddings from being performed by UMC clergy or in UMC churches. In addition, the Traditional Plan provides for stricter enforcement of this policy than now exists.



However, the GC is not yet really over. Some aspects of the plan that it adopted are now having to be reviewed by the UMC Judicial

Council, to see if they conform to the UMC Constitution. The JC will meet on April 23. If it declares part or all of the plan unconstitutional, which seems likely or at least possible, we'll be back to square one, with the current rules still in effect. The approximately \$3.7 million cost of this called GC will essentially have been wasted. So will the cost of the meetings of the Commission on a Way Forward. No matter what happens now, what all of this expenditure has produced is essentially a way backward.

### Here's what stood out for me.

- There were supposed to be 864 delegates, but only about 820 showed up. All or most of the missing

## Recent reading

While still thinking about the results of GC, I'm also still reading on a wide assortment of subjects. As an escape from serious topics, I'm currently enjoying mysteries by Peter Robinson. His most recent is *Careless Love*, the latest in a series that includes more than twenty others. Most of my reading, however, is nonfiction.

Especially informative though disturbing have been two recent books about climate change.



*The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, by David Wallace-Wells

*The Water Will Come: Rising Seas: Sinking Cities and the Remaking of the Civilized World*, by Jeff Goodell

On other subjects, I've enjoyed these—

*Shortest Way Home: One Mayor's Challenge and a Model for America's Future*, by Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and a candidate for president who seems quite promising.

*Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*, by Gil Rendle

*Becoming*, by Michelle Obama

I expected to like *Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in an Uncomfortable World*, by Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, but it disappointed me—too emotional for my taste.

## Oops!

On page 2 of the February *Connections*, I gave the One Church Plan the wrong name. Sorry! I must have been having a senior moment. I've corrected it in the file that's on my website.

were apparently from outside the U.S. and were missing because they couldn't get U. S. visas.

- The opening day was devoted entirely to worship and prayer. Some prayers were spoken in the main auditorium by a bishop or other leader. Each of these was focused mainly on a single topic and unfortunately some were sermon-like. Much of the praying, however, was done individually by delegates and other attenders, moving at will among stations set up in the hallways. Some of these prayer stations featured writing prayers and attaching them to a wall, while others offered a variety of other methods. I wonder if devoting this whole day to prayer affected the outcome of the GC. Were any delegates' views changed by something they heard from God in their prayer? Undoubtedly some prayer requests opposed each other. Did God count the numbers of each kind?



- The rest of the days were devoted directly to the declared purpose of this called GC: deciding how to change the UMC's policy about human sexuality while preserving the denomination's unity. Procedures were based on *Robert's Rules of Order* plus the UMC *Book of Discipline's* rules. The method of discussing every issue was for the chairperson (a different bishop for each half-day session) to call on 3 people to speak in favor of the issue and 3 to speak against it, with a strict time limit on each of these speeches. As you can probably imagine, out of 800 delegates there were always many more than 6 who wanted to say something about a given issue.



In many previous years, when delegates wanted to speak they raised their hands or raised bright-colored cards that were furnished for this purpose. In earlier years, some stood, jumped up and down, or even stood on a table in an effort to be seen and get called on, but this was finally forbidden. This year, delegates had electronic keypads on which they indicated that they wanted to speak to the issue, whether they wanted to speak for or against it, or if they instead wanted to make an amendment, raise a point of order, or ask a question. The presiding bishop then must somehow choose which 6 to call on, from among the many more who want to say something.



The bishops presumably try to be fair in their choosing, but they may sometimes give preference to someone they know. They've even been known to choose someone who they know can speak most convincingly for the side the bishop favors. As long as everyone could see from the raised hands that many more delegates were wanting to speak than were able to get called on, it was frustrating not to get called on. But now, with the electronic method, the number wanting to speak isn't apparent to anyone but the presiding bishop. Many delegates therefore mistakenly assumed that because they had punched the button on their keypad, they were entitled to speak. This apparent misunderstanding caused angry complaints throughout the sessions, from delegates who wanted to speak but didn't get to. There must be a more transparent and fairer way of getting decisions made in the UMC. But what is it, and how can we find it?

- Especially disappointing to me was the meanness that came from speakers throughout the sessions, when all of the speakers were presumably devoted Christians.



- The large number of GC delegates from Russia surprised me. Several of them spoke often and adamantly in favor of the Traditional Plan. I later learned that in Russia homosexuality is a crime, and that anyone who visibly opposes this policy risks being arrested. Russian United Methodists would therefore be risking severe punishment if they belonged to a church that didn't treat homosexuality as sinful. That presumably would be a strong motivation for them to try to get the UMC's present policy preserved. I had known that some African GC delegates were in similar situations, but I hadn't been aware that it was also true for so many UMC members elsewhere outside of the U.S.



- An aspect of this GC that seemed counterproductive was that on the first business day it functioned as a legislative committee—a committee of the whole. Then on the next day, all of the same delegates, dealing again with the same issues, became a plenary session to which the decisions of the legislative committee were presented for consideration and decision. This duplication apparently was because UMC rules require GCs to be

divided into legislative committees that consider all petitions (UMC name for proposals) and make recommendations about them to the plenary sessions. However, it made for a very clumsy and unnecessarily time-consuming procedure for this called GC that was considering only one topic.



• At the 2019 GC, members of the press had to sit in a balcony that allowed them no access to the delegates or observers and provided only a sideways view of the proceedings. Just as when the press was denied access to meetings of the Commission on the Way Forward, this treatment of the press severely reduces the transparency and availability of information that should characterize UMC decision-making bodies.



### A discouraging report on GC

On Sunday morning after the February 2019 GC, I attended a review of it given by the senior pastor of my local congregation. He assured us that nothing was going to change about our beloved First UMC as a result of GC's decisions. We are still going to love and welcome everyone as we do now, he told us. Although he said he hadn't completely liked any of the plans proposed at GC, he acknowledged that he is a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, which strongly supports the Traditional Plan.



Our congregation includes LGBT members, he acknowledged, and we love them and will continue to love them. We adhere to scripture and will continue to do so, he assured us. What governs us is love, he told us repeatedly, and there will be no change in that. "If you are here to grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ," he said, "this church is for you." I wanted to say, "That's not how I've experienced it," but I kept quiet.

At the end there was a very brief time for questions, but the questions were merely about basic UMC operation. Driving home, I kept wishing that there had been an opportunity to stay and have an open, in-depth discussion of what we had heard. I felt sad that no such opportunity had been available. Needed transparency and depth were missing.



### A thought-provoking presentation

Last week I heard a very different kind of presentation. It was at the annual Perkins School of Theology for the Laity, at SMU. It was a thought-provoking 3-hour presentation by Adam Hamilton, the senior pastor of the Church of the Resurrection UMC in Kansas City, the largest UMC in the U.S., with 22,000 members.



I was temporarily turned off at the beginning of the program when the woman who introduced it addressed us several times as "you guys," even though more than half of the audience was female. Why? We don't say "you men" to groups that include women, and "you guys" is the same thing. Why not say just "you"? But fortunately the program went uphill from there.

Especially thought-provoking for me was Hamilton's comparison of UMC General Conference to the Jerusalem conference described in chapter 15 of the book of Acts, at which different factions argued about whether it was necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised in order to become part of the church. He compared the traditionalists' insistence on continuing to require circumcision, as Judaism did, to today's UMC traditionalists' insistence on continuing to obey ancient purity laws and treat homosexuality as sin.



This issue, all back issues, a list of books I've written about, a list of recent books I recommend, and more *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.

Also interesting to me was Hamilton's explanation of how he deals with controversial issues when he speaks to his congregation, in which the whole spectrum of Bible interpretation and political views is represented. For the first 15 minutes, he explained, he states the arguments that favor the conservative viewpoint, letting conservative hearers know that he understands their viewpoint. Then he devotes the next 15 minutes to presenting the progressive/liberal view of the issue. Often, he finds, this leads some hearers to recognize that the other side has some valid points.



Whether or not anyone changes sides as a result, however, this method at least lets people on each side know that their pastor understands and cares about what they think, even if he disagrees with it.

Adam Hamilton told us that he never takes a vote unless he is sure that nearly everyone will vote yes. If he doesn't expect that to happen, he explains, he knows that more conversation about the issue is needed, to arrive at a position that nearly everyone will feel they at least can live with. Could this method be applied to the current UMC situation, with regard to the UMC policy about sexuality?

Hamilton apparently is instigating unofficial meetings in several U.S. locations in coming months, to discuss how U.S. progressives and centrists might proceed from here. However, it's not generally known who is invited to these meetings or what's being said in them. That's making some UMC members hopeful but making many others uneasy. It's another instance of concealment where we need transparency.

### Widespread sadness and outrage

Many progressive and centrist UMC members are sad or even outraged over the GC's result. The Reconciling Ministries Network, which promotes equal treatment for people of all genders and sexual orientations, is being deluged with new members. Many Annual Conferences (U.S. regional governing bodies), some Central Conferences (governing bodies elsewhere), and many local congregations have issued statements saying that they will disobey the present rules about sexuality or the new rules if the Traditional Plan takes effect.



Many are discussing how a new Methodist denomination might be created. But what is really likely to happen to the present UMC?

So far, it's impossible to say. The next regular GC meets in May 2020, and all of the same subjects will undoubtedly arise again, with discussion that's equally heated. Delegates to the 2020 GC will be elected at AC and CC sessions this spring and summer, and some will undoubtedly be different from the 2019 delegates. But will their overall voting patterns be significantly different? No one knows. What is known is that the distribution of delegates will be different from the February 2019 GC, because this distribution is based on membership numbers in ACs and CCs, and those numbers have changed since this year's delegate allotment was set 4 years ago. At the 2020 GC, there will be 20 more delegates from Africa and 20 fewer from the U.S., which seems likely to have a big impact. And by the 2024 GC, there will probably be more delegates from Africa than from the U.S.



Since the 2019 GC, it has become apparent that several people from Africa acted as delegates illegally. That's currently being investigated, but it's not yet known what effect the findings could have on the GC results. More serious is that many UMC groups in Africa merely approximate the membership numbers on which their GC delegate allotments are based. Unlike other parts of the UMC, they don't use strict rules about who is a church member. This discrepancy seems to urgently need investigating and correcting, but that surely will not happen before the 2020 GC.



### What now?

Will the UMC split? How many individuals and groups that strongly disagree with the results of the 2019 GC will stay and resist, and how many will leave? Are voting and *Robert's Rules* effective for making our decisions? If not, what would be effective?

Is a global organization workable? Many religious beliefs and practices heavily reflect regional culture. Are the world's cultures too varied to work together effectively and harmoniously?

How could the UMC really move forward: become equally open to all people; make our official beliefs consistent with what has been learned by the best scholars; and adopt fairer, more transparent methods of church decision-making?

These are hard but very important questions.

*Barbara*