

COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD'S REPORT to the GENERAL CONFERENCE

PREFACE

This report to the Special Session of the General Conference from the Commission on a Way Forward is submitted out of a desire to serve our whole church and particularly the delegations who will gather in February, 2019. It is offered in the context of a global church on four continents, in the four official languages of the church, and in an attempt to share material that honors this reality. This report is the work of the Commission on a Way Forward and is shared directly with the special session of the General Conference.

HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD'S REPORT

Since its inception, both the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops understood that the Commission was doing its work on behalf of the Council of Bishops and that the Council of Bishops would be submitting a report and proposed legislation to the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019. This was the interpretation of the plain language of the Offering of a Way Forward, approved in Portland at the 2016 General Conference under which the Commission did its work.

On May 25, 2018, after the final meeting of the Commission on a Way Forward the Judicial Council released its decision (Decision 1360) indicating that the Commission is to submit its report and proposed legislation directly to the General Conference. In order to best serve the church, the Commission has reformatted its report to reflect this change and to honor the work done by the Commission.

This has given the Commission the opportunity to reflect on its purpose. The Commission is a group of thirty-two persons brought together to help the church find a way forward. The Commission's purpose was never to arrive at uniformity of thought among its own members or to design the shape the church should take in the future. The purpose has been to help the Council of Bishops and the General Conference to do this work of decision-making. And so what the church will see in the report at no point suggests that Commission members had full agreement with everything in the report. While not agreeing with everything in this report the Commission members always had agreement to keep the work moving ahead for the benefit of the whole church. The Commission members have been in covenant with each other, and remain hopeful about God's continuing work through the United Methodist Church.

As you read the report, please note places where work was done by the Commission and where additional information is included from work done by the Council of Bishops or a separate subgroup of bishops.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2018 is the 50th anniversary of The United Methodist Church. We look back upon the formation of The United Methodist Church in 1968, which itself must include the histories of the Central Jurisdiction in the United States, and the Evangelical United Brethren. In 1972 the present language about human sexuality was added to our *Book of Discipline*. Increasing harm to one another, and a deepening impasse related to human sexuality and the unity of the church has led to a Special Session of the General Conference, which will receive this report and other matters in harmony with the Council of Bishops' call for this Special Session.

KEY FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS

Our Common Core

The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds; Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith; General Rules; The Wesley Hymns; Disciplined Engagement with Scripture; Works of Piety, Mercy and Justice; Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist; Small Group Accountability and Support (Class and Band Meetings); A Connectional Way of Life that includes Superintendency, Itineracy, and Conferencing. From "Wonder, Love and Praise", three concepts: The saving love of God is meant for all people; the saving love of God is transformative; and the saving love of God creates community.

The Need for Space and Separation

The position that United Methodists have done great harm to each other, and/or that there are irreconcilable theological differences, and that this requires the establishment for more distinct space between constituencies in our church and perhaps the separation of some segments of our church, primarily based on values, from each other.

Centralization and De-Centralization

Grounded in the concepts of "Connectional Unity and Local Freedom" (*Book of Discipline*, 125). Centralization and De-Centralization each have positive and negative characteristics. The positive quality of centralization is order and clarity; the negative trait can be stagnancy and suppression. The positive quality of de-centralization is freedom and contextualization; the negative trait can be chaos and confusion. A key question in relation to centralization and de-centralization is toward which does our present missional situation call us to lean?

Traditionalist, Contextual and Progressive Values

Traditionalists value marriage between one man and one woman, and sexual activity within this relationship. Traditionalists also seek greater accountability at every level of the church. Contextualists want to translate the gospel into the varied settings in which God places us. They see this as a missiological calling, and believe that the work of the church can be adapted in a global church. Progressives value full inclusion of all persons in the life of the church, at every level, and this includes the LGBTQ community. They also believe that the church can celebrate same-gender marriages.

Learning to be a Global Church

The awareness, especially among United Methodists in the United States, that we aspire to understand and live from our worldwide nature. This is a journey of listening, humility, and crossing boundaries of geography, language and culture to understand how faith and culture shapes conversations around LGBTQ identity and practice and the unity of the church. As the conversation matures, it will be less dominated by colonial habits of the past and present.

Definitions of Unity

Our unity is in Jesus Christ: One Lord, One Spirit, One Faith, and One Baptism. Jesus prays for this unity and this unity is made visible in his body, the church. Our unity may be visible in new forms and structures. The path toward greater unity is one that is undertaken in coordination with the work on the *General Book of Discipline*. When we cannot live in unity with other, our witness is compromised and we do harm to each other.

Maximizing Mission and the Distinction between Public and Private Mission

We exist as a church on four continents, under the cross and the flame. To maximize the mission is to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment in as many places in the world as possible. The public mission is our stated purpose, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (*Book of Discipline*, 120). At times this can be in conflict with our private mission, which at times places a higher value on satisfying the constituent groups already within our church.

***The Anatomy of Peace* and our Ways of Being with Each Other**

The condition of our heart to another person very much shapes the outcomes. If we have a heart at peace, we see the other as a person, with many needs, hopes and gifts. If we have a heart at war, we see the other as an object or an obstacle to our own desires and visions. In addition, a heart at war exaggerates the differences between persons in order to prepare to go to war with them. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. And when persons (or groups) are at war with each other, they escalate the conflict with each other in order to justify themselves, and can be in collusion with each other for the gain of their own group’s interests. The Commission worked diligently to continually condition ourselves to have hearts of peace. This essential work gave us the ability to get beyond our positions and to seek and discover the interests we have in common in terms of our faith, our Biblical understandings, our love for The United Methodist Church, and our Christ’s mission to reach the world with the transforming power of God.

Praying our Way Forward, in Council Meetings and in Annual Conferences

Prayer has been at the heart of the Way Forward process since May, 2016. We have spent time in deep prayer and in many languages in the Commission and Council meetings. Annual Conferences have led emphases and calls to prayer. And as we approach the Special Called General Conference we are asked that our members across the world pray each day from 2:23-2:26, numbers which correspond to the dates of February 23-26, 2019.

HOW THE COMMISSION DID ITS WORK

The Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) met in United Methodists buildings and local churches, as a sign of our connection and as an expression of stewardship. The COWF then sought alignment with the mission, vision and scope given by the Council of Bishops. The members drafted a covenant that would guide speech and actions, in the meetings and in between them. Over time the agendas included the sharing of faith testimonies, study of several biblical books, including Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and John’s Gospel, and time of intercessory prayer for each other.

The Commission listened to outside voices, among them Erin Hawkins, Dawn Hare, Russell Richey, David Scott, Bishops Woodie White, and Scott Jones. The COWF worked in a spirit of collaboration with other committees and boards of the church; for example two colloquy were held in partnership with the General Board on Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), one on human sexuality and a second on mission in the United States. Members of the COWF and the Committee on Faith and Order met together to draft the theological framework. Members of the COWF met with personnel from the General Board on Global Ministries (GBGM) to draft the missional framework. And the COWF had ongoing conversation with the leadership of Wespath. One of our meetings was held in Berlin, Germany and the Commission was much benefited by having discussions outside of the United States as the focus of the Commission’s work was to consider the global context of The United Methodist Church in the midst of its work.

The COWF also gathered data from constituents and stakeholders from across the connection. Commission members and moderators spoke and listened in most of the theological schools in the U.S. and at Africa University. Dialogues were held with renewal and advocacy groups and with clergy and laity of annual conferences. An electronic platform allowed members to see submissions from across the world that expressed the convictions of United Methodists.

The COWF presented an interim report to the Council of Bishops in November, 2017, and based on that feedback presented again in February, 2018. A final report was given to the COB in May, 2018.

THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF THE COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD'S WORK

Delegates at the General Conference in May 2016 in Portland voted to approve the Council of Bishops' request to "pause for prayer" and form a commission to explore options that help maintain and strengthen the unity of the church. In July, 2016 the executive committee of the Council of Bishops met in Chicago to identify the mission, vision and scope of the work and selected three moderators.

Bishops nominated and selected 32 members to serve on the Commission, focusing on a diverse body that represents our global church. In the Commission there are persons from nine countries with a variety of theological perspectives. The Commission is one third laity, one third clergy, and one third bishops and includes younger persons, gay persons, professors, administrators, pastors, youth ministers, campus ministers, lay leaders, large church pastors, and persons identified with renewal and advocacy groups. There is Korean, Hispanic, African- American, Filipino, European, and African representation.

The key part of the early work was to build trust and intentional community among a group of people who had good reasons not to trust each other. At the heart of the work on relationship building was the book *The Anatomy of Peace* by the Arbinger Institute, which focuses on how we live with a heart at war, seeing others as obstacles to or vehicles for what we want, or a heart at peace, seeing others as people. A heart at war exaggerates our differences. A heart at peace sees what we have in common. The Commission wrote a significant covenant with each other and at the end of the first meeting gave everyone the invitation to leave, with honor. Commission members focused on finding a way forward rather than on representing groups or constituencies. The Commission's practice of voicing differing theological views and interpretations of scripture stands as a model for what kind of ministry we are both called and empowered by God to do. This led us to discover the interests behind the various positions, and opened up multiple possibilities for how the church can continue to fulfill the ministry of Christ in both unity and with diversity.

The Commission spent significant time listening to the church through an open framework for receiving documents, ideas and testimonies. The Commission received and processed feedback from boards and agencies, local churches, annual conferences, individual lay and clergy persons, candidates for ministry and seminary students. Conversations took place with individuals and interest groups across the globe. Many commission members additionally spoke to numerous groups throughout the connection.

The Commission met nine times over seventeen months. The Commission reviewed a wide variety of petitions presented as legislation to previous General Conferences regarding human sexuality and examined how other faith communities and denominations are responding or have responded to the question of inclusion of LGBTQ persons. Along the way the commission members worked on models of a way forward. The Commission gave an extended interim report to the Council of Bishops in November, 2017 that included three sketches: one that focused on accountability within the context of the current

Book of Discipline language, one that focused on removing restrictive language and placing a high value on contextuality and protections of various perspectives, and one that reimagined the church as a unified core with multiple branches. Three key values in these models were mission, space and unity. How can a model maximize the Wesleyan witness? How much space do we need? How much unity is possible?

The Commission examined very carefully the impact of any of the models on the global church with its conferences inside and outside of the United States. The Commission discussed how to carefully implement wording that allows the various regions of the church to do what's appropriate for them in order to fulfill the mission to make disciples.

With continued input from bishops and constituencies around the church, the Commission refined and adapted the models and presents this report to the Special Session of the General Conference. Future work will be with delegations to create a culture that will listen to God, receive the report, and do this work with a heart of peace and not a heart of war.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD

Note: Commission member names are listed without title. While Commission members respect and appreciate titles and academic degrees, we most often addressed each other on a first name basis, practicing a convicted humility as we accomplished our work together.

Jorge Acevedo

Brian Adkins

Jacques Akasa Umembudi

Tom Berlin

Matt Berryman

Helen Cunanan

David Field

Grant Hagiya

Hortense Aka Dago-Akribi

Scott Johnson

Jessica LaGrone

Thomas Lambrecht

Myungrae Kim Lee

Julie Hager Love

Mazvita Machinga

Patricia Miller

Mande Guy Muyombo

Eben Nhiwatiwa

Dave Nuckols

Casey Langley Orr

Gregory Palmer

Donna Pritchard

Tom Salsgiver

Robert Schnase

Jasmine Rose Smothers

Leah Taylor

Peter Torio

Debra Wallace-Padgett

Rosemarie Wenner

Alice Williams

John Wesley Yohanna

Alfiado S. Zunguza

Moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward:

David K. Yemba, Ken Carter and Sandra Steiner Ball

MISSION, VISION and SCOPE

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!

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Note: The Theological Framework was developed by a team that included members of the Commission and the Committee on Faith and Order. It was affirmed by the Commission on a Way Forward at their January, 2018 meeting and edited after the Council of Bishops meeting.

An Ecumenical Church [Acts 2; John 3; Genesis 1, 3]

United Methodists are part of the great ecumenical consensus expressed in the historic creeds of the Christian faith: affirmations about the triune God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the life-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit, and inclusive of the marks of the church that remain before us as gift and task—one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The church is the community of people transformed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ so that personal and communal life manifests holiness by demonstrating love for God and their fellow human beings. We share with Christians across many communions, Eastern and Western, Protestant and Catholic, a commitment to the central role of scripture in forming and sustaining the church in doctrine and practice. We affirm the gracious work of God in creation, and the reality of the image of God in every human being, obscured by sin and alienation from God, but never utterly effaced.

Grace and Holiness [Romans 5, Mark 12]

As Wesleyans we are heirs of a distinctive account of grace, which is God's pardon and God's empowerment in the whole journey of salvation. We believe in the universality of the call to repentance and return to God who is our life, and the universal reach of God's Spirit which grants freedom and power to respond to that call. We affirm the free offer of unconditional pardoning love, along with the divine determination to transform and reclaim as God's own individuals, along with the communities and institutions they inhabit. We understand the goal of salvation to be holiness, understood fundamentally as perfection in love toward God and neighbor, to be pursued in this life as well as consummated in the life to come.

Connection and Mission [Philippians 2, Matthew 28]

As the fruit of our history as a movement we affirm the communal and connected form of the church's life, and bear witness to the social and relational character of growth in holiness through mutual support and mutual oversight. We lift up the centrality of practicing the means of grace as the essential nature of discipleship, that calls us to work out salvation trusting ever in the activity and power of the Holy Spirit. And finally, we understand the church is called into being for the sake of the world, to spread the good news of God's mercy in Jesus Christ and to be a sign of God's intention for peace, justice and flourishing for the whole creation. The church embodies God's mission for the world through making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and is called into being for the sake of the world.

A Convicted Humility [1 Corinthians 12-14]

We begin from the recognition that our members hold a wide range of positions regarding same sex relations and operate out of sincerely held beliefs. They are convinced of the moral views they espouse, and seek to be faithful to what they see as the truth God calls the church to uphold. It remains the case that their views on this matter are distinctly different, and in some cases cannot be reconciled. We pray the exaggeration of our differences will not divide us. We also recognize and affirm that as United Methodists we hold in common many more fundamental theological commitments, commitments which bind us together despite our real differences. These also have implications for how we understand and express our disagreements, and for what we do about them. Therefore, we seek to advocate a stance we have called convicted humility. This is an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may

stand in need of corrections. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together. In that spirit, we wish to lift up the shared core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement, and ground our search for wisdom and holiness.

We remain persuaded that the fruitfulness of the church and its witness to a fractured world are enhanced by our willingness to remain in relationship with those who share our fundamental commitments to scripture and our doctrinal standards, and yet whose views of faithfulness in this regard differ from our own.

MISSIONAL FRAMEWORK

Note: The Missional Framework was drafted by members of the Commission in consultation with a Wesleyan missiologist. It was affirmed by the Commission on a Way Forward at their January, 2018 meeting and edited after the Council of Bishops meeting.

UNITY IN MISSION

AS THE CHURCH SEEKS A WAY FORWARD, WE BELIEVE OUR MISSION UNIFIES US BOTH AS A MOVEMENT AND A CHURCH:

- ▶ The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This mission begins with and belongs to God. The church and humans do not own or control mission. God's mission reconciles individuals to God and each other through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, heals the brokenness of individuals and the world, and restores individuals and the world to God's intended fullness for creation.
- ▶ The church exists to bring people to a saving knowledge of God through Christ, make and develop Christian disciples, worship the Triune God, and partner in God's mission in the world. The church must be in mission to be fully the church. Mission is a shared responsibility of laity and clergy.
- ▶ Mission is incarnational. God's mission always happens in specific times and places. Thus, it looks different in different contexts. It works through individuals' and groups' cultures, social systems, and senses of identity, even when it seeks to reconcile, heal, and restore them.
- ▶ Mission goes beyond the activity of any one group of Christians. All Christians everywhere are participants in God's mission. All people everywhere, including all Christians, need God's mission of reconciliation, healing, and restoration.
- ▶ While all United Methodists participate in the church's mission, not all participate in the same way. The Holy Spirit gives distinctive gifts and passions for mission. United Methodists as a tradition have distinctive gifts and passions while our sub-groups and members also have their own distinctive gifts and passions. We have historically been organized to support mission in all places and contexts.

TO BE UNIFIED IN MISSION REQUIRES:

- ▶ Faithfulness. We will continue to practice shared ministry, conferencing, itinerant ministry, and general superintendency, not for their own sake but to be faithful to God's mission.
- ▶ Humility. We will practice our faithfulness with humility, knowing that our understanding of God's mission is always partial.
- ▶ Contextuality. We will practice our distinctive United Methodist ways of being church differently in different contexts, even as we seek agreement on their meaning.
- ▶ Creativity. We will experiment with new forms of mission and polity to support missional engagement with ever- changing contexts.
- ▶ Flexibility. We will be flexible in how we understand and practice being church to support creative experiments in United Methodism.

► Mutuality. We will recognize all contextual adaptations and creative expressions as valid expressions of United Methodism. No one expression is normative for all others.

► Generosity. We will encourage each other in the generous use of our distinctive gifts and passions for the sake of God's mission.

We pray that these principles may guide us in a way forward that leads to deeper discipleship of Jesus Christ, more faithful service in the transformation of the world, and a more unified practice of being the church of Jesus Christ, sent by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit in mission for all the world.

Amen.