

General Conference 2024 Recap

This was the first time our worldwide governing body was able to meet since the Covid-19 pandemic. From April 23 - May 3, many services of worship were held, sermons preached, prayers given, and important decisions made. While each of these components were important to the mission and ministry of the church, this document will focus on the decisions made that impact the future of United Methodist churches. Below is a list some of those significant decisions (with much information taken directly from umnews.org, the official news agency of the United Methodist Church) by topic in alphabetical order. Please note, the goal of this is to be informational rather than opinionated. Also note, this is far from everything discussed but is fairly comprehensive.

AFRICA

One of the questions going into GC was whether or not the African delegates would be able to overcome travel and visa issues to make it to the event. In the end, 20 - 25% of the African delegates were unable to attend. Nevertheless, it was decided that because Africa is the largest growth area for Methodism in the world and perhaps has more United Methodists than the U.S.A, they would add two Bishops to their region. Originally, they were to add 5, but because of budget issues, the GC chose a more reserved path this year. Near the end of the week, a number of members of the African delegation released a statement condemning their treatment as well as decisions made at General Conference.

APOLOGY FOR SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

On the final day of General Conference, the Rev. Gary Graves, secretary of the General Conference, apologized on behalf of the church for the way the denomination has prevented people from being held accountable for sexual misconduct, thus perpetuating harm within local churches and other ministry settings and damaging the United Methodist connection.

“The United Methodist Church apologizes for the times we allowed our desire to protect the Church to outweigh our desire to care for victims and survivors of sexual misconduct. We have allowed polity and protection of the institutional Church to prevent us from holding persons accountable,” Graves said. “We apologize for the times we have not listened to you, doubted your stories, ignored your wounds, and have not tended to your pain. We believe this has contributed to allowing an unsafe culture to exist.”

APOLOGY TO HAWAII

The GC approved a formal apology to the people of Hawaii for the UMC’s involvement in the overthrow of their government by the United States in 1893. The Rev. Harcourt W. Peck had served as a sharpshooter during the overthrow before becoming the first pastor of First Methodist Episcopal Church of Hawaii.

ASIAN AMERICANS SUPPORTED

A resolution was approved condemning racial-ethnic discrimination and gender-based violence against Asian Americans. The resolution condemns increasing discrimination against racial-ethnic minorities, especially Asian Americans, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. It condemns the violations against religious minorities in India, including the recent demolition and burning of churches and schools in the northeastern state of Manipur.

BUDGET

The budget of the UMC was decreased by 43% for the upcoming quadrennium. This is a reflection of the disaffiliation of over 7600 US churches, more churches leaving in the future, and an overall challenge in tithing in previous years due to decreased attendance and the Covid-19 pandemic.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

The majority of legislation supported by climate justice activists within The United Methodist Church was passed by General Conference on the consent calendar in the early part of its second week. But they were unable to get General Conference to require that United Methodist institutions, including Wespath — the denomination’s pension and benefits agency — divest from fossil fuel company stocks.

DEACONS GIVEN SACRAMENTAL RITES

Ordained Deacons can now preside at the sacraments in their appointments without needing explicit permission from their bishop. This means deacons can now offer Holy Communion and conduct baptisms where they have been appointed to serve, whether that is a church, outreach ministry or mission. It is anticipated that this will become effective as of January 1, 2025.

DISAFFILIATION

There was no path for disaffiliation created for churches wishing to depart the UMC. The option of utilizing paragraph 2549, the church closure paragraph, still remains in some Annual Conferences.

EPISCOPAL CHURCH RELATIONS

The UMC voted to formally enter into communion with the Episcopal Church. This reflects a desire to increase connections between the two denominations. If the Episcopal Church affirms the agreement, which might not happen until meetings scheduled for 2027, it will mean that the two denominations recognize each other as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in which the Gospel is rightly preached and taught.”

EURASIA DEPARTS THE DENOMINATION

By a vote of 672 to 67, the delegates approved the departure of four Eurasian annual conferences — which encompasses churches in Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Together, the four plan to form the autonomous Christian Methodist Church.

ISRAEL INVESTMENTS

General Conference delegates this week approved a resolution calling on United Methodist institutions not to invest in bonds of Israel, Turkey and Morocco because of those nations’ long-term military occupations. It’s advisory, and does not change Book of Discipline [Paragraph 717](#), on sustainable and socially responsible investments.

LGBTQIA+

This section is the longest because a significant portion of the legislation debated had to do with LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

In short, restrictive language was removed from the Book of Discipline (BoD) regarding the performing of LGBTQIA+ marriages in UM churches as well as the appointment of LGBTQIA+ persons as pastors in the UM church. A more comprehensive list of petitions and resolutions passed comes below:

- **Undoing the Traditional Plan passed in 2019**
 - Petition 20191 – This petition strikes the language banning UMC funds from going to LGBTQIA+ causes and replaces it with making sure that UMC funds don't go towards causes that reject LGBTQIA+.
 - Petition 20176 – This petition strikes the language added by the Traditional Plan in 2019 barring district committees on ordained ministry and conference boards of ordained ministry from recommending clergy candidates that don't meet the requirements in Paragraph 304.1-3.
 - Petition 20304 – This petition strikes language prohibiting bishops from consecrating “self-avowed and practicing homosexuals” and requiring annual conference boards of ordained ministry to examine candidates regarding their sexuality.
 - Petition 20387 – This petition strikes language requiring specific minimum punishments for performing same-gender weddings.

- **Safety for LGBTQIA+ clergy**
 - Petition 20709 – This petition adds an option for elders who are LGBTQIA+ to be appointed across annual conference lines, when they cannot be guaranteed a safe appointment in their home conferences.

- **Removing “Incompatible” from the practice of homosexuality.**
 - On May 2, by a 523-161 vote, General Conference delegates eliminated the 52-year-old assertion in the denomination’s Social Principles that “the practice of homosexuality... is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

- **Removing “Celibacy in singleness”**
 - By a vote of 544 to 121, delegates approved a change to the requirements that clergy practice “celibacy” in singleness — an addition made in 1984 that targeted gay candidates for ministry. Instead, the delegates supported adding after the requirement of integrity in all personal relationships, “social responsibility and faithful sexual intimacy expressed through fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, mutual consent, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.”

- **Removing chargeable offenses including not being celibate in singleness or faithful in marriage**
 - By a vote of 474 to 206, delegates approved striking from church law the chargeable offenses “practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings, including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.”

- In the same vote, the delegates maintained the chargeable offense of immorality but rejected a proposal to add the definition “including, but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness, or not faithful in a marriage.”
- **Clergy have final say on weddings they perform.**
 - By a vote of 479 to 203, delegates adopted the statement: “No clergy at any time may be required or compelled to perform, or prohibited from performing, any marriage, union, or blessing of any couple, including same-sex couples. All clergy have the right to exercise and preserve their conscience when requested to perform any marriage, union, or blessing of any couple.”

MARRIAGE DEFINITION - NEW

A new definition for marriage was written into the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church. It now states “Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred lifelong covenant that brings to be of faith [adult man and woman of consenting age or two adult persons of consenting age] into union with one another and into deeper relationship with God and the religious community.”

MEMBERSHIP ELIGIBILITY

“Gender” and “Ability” were added to the categories which may not be discriminated against to be members of a United Methodist Church.

REDUCTION IN REQUESTED GIVING

Delegates voted to reduce a key component of calculating apportionments — the portion of church giving requested to fund the general-church budget. As a result, conferences will shift from their current base rate of 3.29% to a base rate of 2.6% for 2025 and 2026. Then, if the apportionment collection rate is 90% or higher in those years, the base rate will jump to 2.9% for 2027 and 2028.

REDUCTION OF AMERICAN BISHOPS

Delegates voted to set the number of U.S. bishops at 32. That marks a decrease from the 39 active bishops currently serving in the U.S. and the 46 included in the budget approved by the 2016 General Conference. By a vote of 631 to 65, delegates supported the committee’s unanimous recommendation for the following distribution of U.S. bishops:

- Southeastern Jurisdiction: Nine
- Northeastern Jurisdiction: Six
- North Central Jurisdiction: Six
- South Central Jurisdiction: Six
- Western Jurisdiction: Five

REGIONALIZATION

A new level of church government called “Regions” was approved for further vote at Annual Conferences. If 2/3 of all Annual Conferences around the world approve this measure over the next year, it will become church law. In effect, Regionalization will separate the UMC into 4 regions comprising Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and the US. Each region would be able to make cultural changes to the Book of Discipline which would not impact the other regions.

Delegates also approved a measure titled “Regionalization and Contextualization of Marriage,” submitted by Michigan Conference Bishop David Bard for the Council of Bishops. The new additions to the Book of Discipline allow central conferences to set their standards for marriage rites and clergy ordination.

REINSTATEMENT OF PREVIOUSLY DEFROCKED OR DISMISSED CLERGY

It was decided that if a clergyperson had their license for ministry revoked due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or for performing a same-sex wedding, there would be a pathway for reinstatement in the denomination.

RETIREMENT PLAN

A new retirement plan for United Methodist clergy in the U.S. won approval overwhelmingly at General Conference. The plan is called Compass, and was conceived and championed by Wespath, the denomination’s pension and benefits agency. Wespath retirement plans going back generations have offered U.S. clergy a monthly pension benefit for life, but Compass is a defined contribution plan, more like a 401(k) offered by most corporate employers. Wespath leaders said the denomination’s steady numerical decline over many years required a new, sustainable approach to supporting retired clergy.

REVISED SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

The Social Principles are the UMC’s effort to speak into issues around the world from a Biblical perspective. Before this year, the book of Social Principles was quite thick and the revisions were an effort to synthesize much of the information and eliminate redundancy. Some changes to the Social Principles include:

- Reject governmental use of threats, extortion, unlawful detentions, extrajudicial killings and other forms of coercion to silence political opponents.
- Speak out against slavery, torture, genocide and war crimes.
- Reaffirm the longtime opposition to the death penalty proclaimed by The United Methodist Church and its predecessors.
- Commit to fair and proportional sentencing and to the humane treatment of those who are imprisoned, while insisting on accountability.
- Support civil disobedience in protest of “unjust or immoral laws.”
- Deplore war and all other forms of violent conflict and support people who follow the nonviolent example of Jesus.
- Also support people who choose military service as a result of personal conviction and urge “that they perform their duties in harmony with the tenets of the Christian faith and in accordance with the laws of the Geneva Conventions.”
- Affirm health care as a basic human right.
- Call on church and society to support and advocate for the well-being of all children and young people.
- Support the rights of Indigenous, native and aboriginal communities.
- Oppose all laws and policies that attempt to criminalize, dehumanize, or punish displaced individuals and families based on their status as migrants, immigrants, or refugees.
- Support “for the equal rights, liberties, and protections of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.”

PALESTINE

Throughout the GC there have been gatherings in witness and protest for the ongoing conflict in Palestine. “Sponsored by United Methodist Kairos Response, the rally brought together more

than 100 United Methodist delegates and observers — along with at least six bishops — to hear from a variety of speakers and call attention to Palestine-related legislation before General Conference. The United Methodist Church has opposed Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands since 1976. In March, the United Methodist Council of Bishops called for a ceasefire in the region.”

UNITED METHODIST BUILDING

The GC celebrated the 100th anniversary of the United Methodist Building in Washington DC which sits directly across from the United States Capitol building.

UNITED WOMEN IN FAITH

The organization formerly known as United Methodist Women gave a presentation. Sally Vonner, United Women in Faith's top executive, detailed the organization's far-reaching impact: It supports nearly 90 community centers across the U.S. and gives millions to women's projects around the world. It trains women leaders and transforms through education. It has a new online digital community, a new national membership model, new podcasts and webinars.

WEDDING POLICIES ESTABLISHED BY CHURCHES

The Judicial Council ruled that local churches could still set policies banning such services within their walls. In Decision 1503, the church court said nothing in the Book of Discipline's Paragraph 2533 “prevents the Board of Trustees of a local church from adopting policies prohibiting the conduct of worship services that include same-sex marriage ceremonies.”

Special Announcement Regarding General Conference Decisions

May 1, 2024

Dear Siblings in Christ of the Susquehanna Annual Conference,

After years of intensive and prayerful debate, the General Conference delegates from all over the world voted to remove language that prohibited United Methodist clergy from performing weddings for same-gender couples. **This change allows churches and clergy to operate according to their conscience, without consequence.**

There are some important things about this decision that we want you to know. First, **pastors have always decided who they will marry.** This is based on several factors including the couples' preparation for the marriage covenant. This has not changed. **Pastors will continue to decide who they will marry. No one will force a pastor to officiate a marriage ceremony for any couple.**

Second, **churches will continue to determine what weddings are held in their church buildings.** This is the decision of the local church's Board of Trustees. Further, the desires of all clergy and congregations in this matter are to be honored and not judged by others.

Specifically, the change will include new language in ¶ 419.12 Book of Discipline that states:

13. The superintendent shall not penalize any clergy from performing, or refraining from performing, a same-sex marriage service.

14. The superintendent shall neither require any local church to hold or prohibit a local church from holding a same-sex marriage service on property owned by a local church.

We know that different people have different opinions on these matters and the diversity of perspectives needs to be respected.

The delegates of the General Conference also voted to remove prohibitions that prevented a Board of Ordained Ministry from recommending a gay or lesbian person for ordination. Gay persons may enter the process to become candidates for ministry, and if approved by the Board of Ordained Ministry, can now be licensed, commissioned, and ordained.

Please be assured that the Bishop and Cabinet will continue to work with churches and clergy to ensure we have the best match possible when making appointments.

We want everyone to have a **VITAL** ministry, not a ministry defined by conflict. We have always worked to place all pastors in appointments where they will be accepted and will be able to work in partnership with the laity to further the mission of Jesus Christ. Our commitment to the local church and the mission of Christ has not changed. Your district superintendent will continue to be your primary contact on appointment related issues.

These recent decisions at the General Conference, reinforce the primacy of God's love in our lives and the world, and add complexity to our life together as United Methodists.

We realize this General Conference decision may bring about various emotions and reactions within our congregations and the broader denomination. There will no doubt be some who are disheartened and pained by this decision as well as some who welcome it. As we collaborate and work together, we feel sure that we can navigate the complexity and respect one another.

The removal of the language around human sexuality returns us to the Book of Discipline that we have had from the founding of the church in 1784 until 1972 when the General Conference first added the restrictive measures into the Book of Discipline.

As United Methodists in the Susquehanna Conference, we remain committed to upholding our Wesleyan values of love, grace, and inclusivity. While we may not all agree on every issue, we are called to continue embodying the love of Christ in our interactions with one another. We invite you to strive to maintain a spirit of unity. Our unity is in Christ and therefore, it is more important than ever to engage in respectful dialogue, compassionate listening, and prayerful practice with one another.

The church is the only institution that exists for those who are not yet a part of it. It exists so others can come to know Christ. It exists to make disciples. Our communion table is open, and so are our hearts. We have important work to do — together. Without fear, and with the joy of the Lord, let's get to the work Jesus calls us to do. Let us be people who share the transforming power of Christ with the world.

In Ministry with you,

Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball & Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi
Resident Bishops

The Susquehanna Conference delegation is hosting two post-General Conference webinars to share the most important takeaways from General Conference and answer questions that you may have.

You **MUST** register to receive the webinar link. Feel free to register individually or as a congregation! These webinars are scheduled for:

- **Thursday May 16 (7 – 8 pm) [REGISTER TODAY](#)**
- **Tuesday May 21 (12 – 1 pm) [REGISTER TODAY](#)**

If you have specific questions regarding General Conference, please submit them using the "Questions & Comments" field in the registration form.

*You can view this page at <https://mailchi.mp/susumc/gc-day-13360365?e=c590364683>