

Who makes decisions for The United Methodist Church?

The only body that can set official policy and speak for the denomination is the General Conference. The General Conference is an international body of nearly 1,000 delegates that meets every four years (2012, 2016, 2020, etc.) to conduct the business of the United Methodist Church. The delegates are elected by annual conferences (at annual meetings) to attend General Conference, and represent approximately 12.8 million United Methodists from around the world. Half (500) of the General Conference delegates are laity (non-clergy members), and half (500) are clergy.

In the same manner, annual conferences are attended by representatives from local churches within their geographical boundaries. For example, our Western North Carolina Annual Conference is attended by lay delegates elected by each local church/charge in addition to each pastor(s) appointed to that church/charge. For example, MUMC has 5 appointed clergy who attend annual conference, and our church's annual charge conference elects 5 additional lay delegates (non-clergy) to attend annual conference, for a total delegation from MUMC of 10. Additional laity are selected to represent each district to "equalize" the number of retired clergy and those who serve in appointments outside of the local church. These district delegates attend and vote during annual conference."

Our Western North Carolina Conference includes 1,136 churches, over 1600 clergy (active and retired), and a total membership of 285,726. We meet at Lake Junaluska, N.C. in late June to discuss the petitions and business that have been sent to the conference for discussion and action. Every four years in advance of General Conference, we elect a delegation of 20 persons (half clergy and half laity) to represent our annual conference. The number of General Conference delegates from every annual conference in United Methodism is determined by a formula based on clergy and lay membership.

During General Conference, delegates discuss and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. These actions, if approved, result in revisions of the Book of Discipline, the denomination's book of Order and Belief, and The Book of Resolutions, policies of the denomination on current social issues. These books are published soon after the General Conference ends, and reflect the proceedings for the year in which the General Conference met. The changes that General Conference makes go into effect on January 1 of the year following the adjournment of General Conference (for example, any changes made during the 2016 General Conference took effect on January 1, 2017) and continue to be in effect for the following four years until the next General Conference meets.

It is at General Conference where delegates wrestle with today's issues in light of scriptural teachings and the church's understanding of that teaching. Here is where the church's official stands and church policies are made regarding such issues as human sexuality, abortion, war and peace, as well as determination of ministries and funding.

At a special called General Conference, February 23-26, 2019, the 1,000 delegates previously elected (by annual conferences) to attend the 2016 General Conference will meet again. The

agenda concerns the United Methodist Church's positions on allowing same gender marriages to be conducted in our churches by our clergy, and whether or not to ordain members of the LGBTQ+ community to serve our churches.

At the 2016 General Conference after approval by the body, a Commission on a Way Forward (of thirty-two members) was created by the Council of Bishops to study, reflect and pray together over these two issues. The Commission will make a recommendation to the Council of Bishops in May, and the Council of Bishops will offer a recommendation(s) to the called General Conference in 2019 for debate and action.

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