

Legislative Recap: General Conference 2020



General Conference Legislative Recap

ABOUT GENERAL CONFERENCE

General Conference is the top lawmaking assembly of The United Methodist Church and the only entity that speaks for the denomination. It convenes every four years, with delegates from the denomination's regions around the world.

MAJOR ACTION

Regionalization Petitions Approved

- Delegates approved legislation that would restructure the denomination to be more contextual in different regions served by the church. Bishop Tracy S. Malone, president of the Council of Bishops, said that "Regionalization would enable the church to be contextual in ministry while remaining connected around the mission of the church and the essentials of the faith." It would enable the church to "honor who we are as a worldwide denomination."
- Regionalization represents an effort to put the church's different geographical regions on equal footing and to make the General Conference less U.S.-centric. The current central conferences and the U.S. would become regional conferences, with the same authority to pass legislation for greater missional impact.
- Delegates also approved the continuation of work on a General Book of Discipline that would be brought to the next regular session of General Conference.
- The regionalization legislation involves an amendment to the church's constitution. This would have to be approved by at least two-thirds of the total votes cast across all annual conferences worldwide in order for much of the regionalization legislation to take effect. If they receive the necessary number of votes, the results would be announced by the United Methodist Council of Bishops. The regionalization constitutional amendment is to be sent out 30 days after the adjournment of General Conference, which means some annual conferences could be voting on the amendment this year.
- Regionalization stands as distinct from the other work of General Conference. It had been in development for many years, with the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters and the Connectional Table collaborating on the petitions that were submitted. It received support from delegates from every region.

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MAJOR ACTION

Removal of Restrictive Language Related to LGBTQ People

The General Conference voted by overwhelming majorities to remove from the United Methodist Book of Discipline discriminatory language and bans related to ministry by, with and for “self-avowed practicing” gay and lesbian people. Actions included:

- Removal of the language that the “practice of homosexuality ... is incompatible with Christian teaching.”
- Removal of the ban on the ordination and appointment of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” clergy.
- Removal of language that made the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” clergy and the performance of same-sex weddings chargeable offenses.
- Removal of mandatory minimum penalties for clergy holding same-sex weddings.
- Removal of a prohibition against using United Methodist funds to support groups, activities and causes that promote the acceptance of homosexuality.
- Removal of the requirement that the General Council on Finance and Administration, the denomination’s finance agency, enforce the funding ban. Instead, the provision says the agency should ensure that church funds do not go to anything that rejects LGBTQ persons or limits the response to the HIV epidemic.
- Allowance for all clergy in good standing to be appointed across annual conference lines when their bishop can’t locate an appointment in their conference.

As they have traditionally done, conference bishops and their cabinets will consult with clergy and staff-parish relations committees to find the best appointments for both the local church and the pastor.

These changes bring the Book of Discipline back to a neutral place where one group is not singled out for discrimination. It holds space for differing opinions within The United Methodist Church by avoiding broad mandates.

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MAJOR ACTION

Historic Firsts

- Bishop Tracy S. Malone, resident bishop of the East Ohio Conference, became the first Black female president of the Council of Bishops on April 30, 2024.
- Bishop David Wilson, resident bishop of the Great Plains Conference, became the first Native American bishop to preside over the General Conference on April 25, 2024.

On Bishop Malone: [LEARN MORE](#)

On Bishop Wilson: [LEARN MORE](#)

MAJOR ACTION

Apportionment Percentage Decreased

In an effort to balance funding important connectional ministries through the general church budget and supporting the local church during financial challenges due to the pandemic and disaffiliation, delegates approved a compromise regarding apportionments. 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 increase to 2.9% for 2027 and 2028.

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MAJOR ACTION

Budget Approved

Delegates approved a 2025-2028 budget of \$373.4 million. That total is contingent on collection rates being at 90% or more for the next two years. If giving is below that percentage, the budget bottom line will be \$353.6 million. The total approved is significantly smaller than the budget approved by the 2016 General Conference. Annual conferences will be asked to pay less in apportionments.

MAJOR ACTION

Adoption of Revised Social Principles

Delegates approved the first overhaul of the denomination's Social Principles in nearly 50 years. The Social Principles, contained in both the Book of Discipline and Book of Resolutions, are statements that reflect official United Methodist teachings on a wide range of topics. They are not church law but are intended to inform United Methodist witness on issues of the day with a biblical foundation. The 2012 General Conference approved revising the Social Principles, setting in motion a process that involved input from people around the world, coordinated by the General Board of Church and Society. In addition to the language changes regarding human sexuality and inclusiveness, the Social Principles address the importance of advocating for human dignity and combating racism and other threats, caring for creation and the environment, standing against social ills, and supporting healthy community in all its forms, including economic, social and political.

MAJOR ACTION

Disaffiliation Policy Ended, Re-affiliation Measure Approved

Delegates removed Paragraph 2553 from the Book of Discipline, ending the disaffiliation policy that was added by the special 2019 General Conference. They also required annual conferences affected by disaffiliation to develop grace-filled policies for reaffiliation of churches that want to rejoin the denomination.

ADDITIONAL MAJOR ACTIONS

Delegates also:

- Approved a constitutional amendment addressing the denomination's commitment to eradicating racism.
- Approved an apology to victims and survivors of sexual misconduct by clergy and lay leaders in the church. The resolution also encourages the reporting of sexual abuse and states that the abuse of power will not be tolerated in the church. Delegates also observed Thursdays in Black in recognition of violence that is perpetrated against women around the world.
- Approved an amendment to include "gender" and "ability" among the attributes that should not impede full participation in the life of the congregation.
- Approved an apology for the role of Methodists in the overthrow of the kingdom of Hawaii in 1893.
- Approved allowing deacons to preside at the sacraments – Holy Communion and baptism -- in their ministry contexts.
- Approved updating jurisdictional young people's ministries, including changing the Division on Ministries with Young People to the Young People's Connectional Network.
- Approved a new retirement plan for U.S. clergy, called Compass, which would be a defined contribution plan similar to what many corporate employers provide. The plan takes effect in 2026.
- Approved a full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church. If the Episcopal Church affirms the agreement, it will mean the denominations recognize each other as the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in with the Gospel is rightly preached and taught."
- Approved adding two bishops for Africa, for a total of 15, and set the number of U.S. bishops at 32 – a decrease from the 39 active bishops and one retired bishop currently serving episcopal areas in the U.S.
- Adopted a new Book of Resolutions, including readopting many resolutions and approving new ones, addressing topics such as climate change, rights of farm workers in the U.S., the observance of the Children's Sabbath, caring for Native people and opposition to racial profiling.
- Adopted a resolution condemning racial-ethnic discrimination and gender-based violence against Asian Americans.
- Approved a resolution calling on United Methodist institutions not to invest in the government bonds of countries that have been cited by the U.N. Security Council or the International Criminal Court for prolonged military occupations.
- Approved a motion to allow four Eurasian conferences to leave the denomination and form an autonomous church.
- Celebrated the impact of Africa University and milestone anniversaries – the 200th anniversary of Methodist mission, the 100th anniversary of the United Methodist Building in Washington, D.C., and the 80th anniversary of the United Methodist Committee on Relief.
- Elected a new Judicial Council, the denomination's top court, and filled positions on the Commission on the General Conference, University Senate, general boards and agencies of the church and other entities, as well as trustees to John Street United Methodist Church in New York, the oldest continuously operating Methodist church in the United States.