

Means of Grace: Holy Conferencing

TEXT: Acts 15:1-21

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 5, 2024

Next week you'll hear the Scripture reading about the Council of Jerusalem again as we talk in more detail about the Wesleyan process of making decisions. But I used it as our text this morning to highlight the first time in the Bible that we see the leaders of the early church gather to make a group decision about a really difficult issue.

In the case of the Council of Jerusalem, the issue was whether Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be included among the followers of Jesus.

At the heart of that argument was not so much what people believed, but whether the men needed to become a part of the Abrahamic covenant by being circumcised.

Because God said they did in the Bible but then seemed to be ignoring all that by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Gentiles, a huge rift developed among Jesus' Jewish followers, so they gathered in Jerusalem to try to sort it out and decide the matter once and for all.

That gathering is an example of what John Wesley would have called "Holy" or "Christian Conferencing."

You hear the word "Conference" thrown around a lot in Methodist circles. There are Charge Conferences, Church Conferences, Annual Conferences, Jurisdictional Conferences, and the session that has been meeting for the past two weeks, the General Conference.

If you substitute the word "meeting" for "conference" you will understand the basic function of those gatherings. But for Wesley, the act of getting together and trying to hash out our differences with the Holy Spirit's guidance was so foundational to spiritual formation that he made "Holy conferencing" the center of his "method" for renewal in the Church of England—the reform movement that came to be called "Methodism."

Unlike in denominations where individual congregations are the basic unit, for United Methodists, the basic unit is not any one church on its own, but instead a group of churches conferencing together to discern the will of God in their particular region, known as the "Annual Conference." Crawford is part of the New England Annual Conference.

The New England Annual Conference is part of the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference, which then joins with Conferences in nations around the globe every four years to do Holy Conferencing at General Conference.

It is at that global General Conference where positions on theological understanding, ethical practices, social principles, ordination, and matters of general administration and worship in all local United Methodist Churches around the world are hashed out. All of those decisions are then published every four years in an updated Book of Discipline.

The whole thing together is known as the "Connection." At a fundamental level, the structure acknowledges that we are part of the much larger Body of Christ—that, whether we like it or not, whether we agree with each other or not, we do not stand on our own. We are connected to each other. That what happens to one happens to us all. We rise or fall together.

The administrative structure of the United Methodist Church is actually part of our theological underpinnings. While my colleagues in other denominations are typically ordained to Word and Sacrament, I and my UMC colleagues are ordained to Word, Sacrament, and Order.

Part of my ordination vows are to make sure that the administrative structures in churches I am appointed to serve not only follow the Book of Discipline, but also that business is conducted in ways that foster the theological understanding of our connection through Christ to each other, to our communities, to other churches, and to the wider world.

Our structure is not task-oriented; it is designed to foster connection and community both inside and outside the church.

The downside of all holy conferencing is that is that making decisions and enacting real change can take a very long time. In the case of working through the issues around human sexuality, it has taken us 52 years of agonizing and hurtful debate.

For literally centuries, our Book of Discipline said nothing about same-gender relationships. Presumably Methodists before 1972 had read the Bible, but they found nothing there that they believed rose to the level of requiring church law to control or punish.

That changed in 1972, when the General Conference voted to put into our social principles that homosexuality was “incompatible with Christian teaching.” That idea then worked its way throughout the Discipline, dictating who could and couldn’t be ordained, who could and could not be married with a United Methodist officiant, what causes could and could not be funded with United Methodist money or hosted in a United Methodist church or affiliated organization, and on and on it went.

From that moment in 1972 on, every General Conference—every four years for 52 years—there have been attempts to take all that out. Holy Conferencing became hurtful conferencing. About 20 years ago even the modest proposal to add that United Methodists were “not of one mind” on the issue went down in flames.

I mean, nothing has been as patently obvious as the fact that we were not of one mind on the issue—we had been fighting about it at every single General Conference since 1972! To me, once we couldn’t even agree to state the obvious—that we didn’t agree—we had lost the thread.

With that lost thread, things began to unravel, as everyone wanted to follow their conscience but our consciences were leading us in different directions.

But, even amidst the unraveling, some levels of holy conferencing were still happening among smaller bodies. And where two or three are gathered, Christ is in our midst. The Holy Spirit did its work.

With the full General Conference unable to meet in 2020 because of Covid, a number of churches decided to leave and form the Global Methodist Church, a new denomination that wanted to keep the restrictions on LGBTQ inclusion in place and who were upset that Annual Conferences like New England were not enforcing them.

By the time there could finally be another world-wide gathering for General Conference this year—the Conference that has been taking place in Charlotte, North Carolina the past two weeks—the balance had shifted.

Across a series of votes that hunted down every restrictive provision in the Discipline—from ordination, to weddings, to funding, to the use of facilities, and finally at the end of this past week to the language in the social principles added in 1972 saying that homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching, every bit of that was removed by strong majorities.

Almost all of them passed on the consent calendar without even any debate.

United Methodists are, now, at last, after 52 years, a fully inclusive church. As one of my colleagues described his video of what happened when the last of those provisions was removed, “I didn’t have a conga line of delegates singing “Love Train” on my General Conference Bingo card!”

While those votes got all the media headlines, that wasn’t the only thing that happened at General Conference, and people who are jubilant about the decision are not the only United Methodists there are.

During the first week, the alignment of national Conference structures was changed in a plan called “regionalization” that will allow those in different regions of the world to adjust their practices in accordance with their regional cultures. For the first time, the United States will be its own region.

So, I’m just going to read you the wrap up from a United Methodist News reporter named Joey Butler to give you a fuller flavor of the Conference and the broader range of actions taken on many fronts. Then I’ll open up for questions.

May 3 wrap-up: Historic conference comes to a close

By Joey Butler

May 3, 2024 | CHARLOTTE, N.C. (UM News)

On the final day of a General Conference eight years in the making — the Rev. Gary Graves, General Conference secretary, referred to it as “the multipurpose 2020 and 2024” meeting — delegates set the budget that will fund the ministries of the denomination for the next four years, a budget significantly lower than the one it set in 2016.

It could be argued that this was the most consequential General Conference since the 1968 assembly that created The United Methodist Church. The church going forward from here is different than it was just a few weeks ago.

Not all agree with the more inclusive stance the delegates took, but the passage of worldwide regionalization ensures all may continue ministry in their own context while remaining part of the connection.

Church leaders are already looking at how members can remain united despite having different views, and delegates created a path for churches that have left the denomination to return in the future.

The votes that changed the church's stance on sexuality may have garnered the most attention, but they were not the only actions taken in Charlotte.

During the 10 days, delegates considered more than 1,000 petitions. Among other actions, they approved a new retirement plan for clergy, granted deacons authority to offer Holy Communion and conduct baptisms in their ministry setting, celebrated church milestones, agreed to a full communion relationship with the Episcopal Church, and approved the departure of four Eurasian annual conferences that plan to become the autonomous Christian Methodist Church.

The final action was a 324-338 vote against reconsidering an earlier petition that would have added fossil fuels to the list of companies in which Wespath is prohibited from investing.

Drawing the assembly to a close with a centering moment after presiding over the final plenary session, Bishop Tracy S. Malone told everyone gathered:

"As you go forward from this General Conference, tell the world about Jesus. As you go, tell them about his love. As you go, be love. ... Let's walk together, beloved, and let us never grow weary of doing the work of the kin-dom."

GC delegates pass budget, reduce number of US bishops

Delegates on May 3 [approved a denominational budget](#) with a bottom line that will vary by about \$20 million, depending on giving collection rates over the next two years.

By a vote of 647 to 31 (a 95% majority), this year's delegates approved a 2025-28 denominational 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.

Reflecting the effect of the loss of a quarter of U.S. churches to disaffiliation, the budget will be between 38% and 41% lower than the one set by the 2016 General Conference.

Delegates also approved a plan for distributing 32 bishops across the U.S. — which represents a reduction from the 39 active bishops currently serving.

United Methodists remove same-sex wedding ban

United Methodist pastors [no longer face potential penalties](#) for being in a same-sex relationship or officiating at same-sex weddings, nor can they be compelled to officiate one.

During the afternoon session of General Conference's final day, delegates approved four changes to church law that together end remaining bans related to homosexuality and protect the rights of pastors to choose which weddings to perform or not to perform.

They also 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."

Panelists look beyond General Conference

The decisions made at this General Conference are a "testimony" to The United Methodist Church, said Bishop Tracy S. Malone, president of the Council of Bishops.

"We are a church where everyone can belong," she said.

Malone was part of [a panel discussing the future of a church](#) where not every member approves of its new inclusive stance.

Removing condemning language on homosexuality opens the church to be in a worldwide conversation, said Greater Northwest Area Bishop Cedric D. Bridgeforth, adding that he hopes that local churches “will not grow weary in well-doing” because these decisions made at General Conference will call for a cultural shift and hard conversations.

‘Get out of God’s way,’ bishop urges

During the [final morning worship at General Conference](#), Council of Bishops President Tracy S. Malone said the work done at General Conference the past 10 days is not as important as what the church will do next.

The resident bishop of the East Ohio Conference grounded her sermon in the words of Psalm 46:1-3, 10-11 (NRSV). She echoed David’s bold proclamation that God is our refuge and our strength.

She asked delegates to imagine a United Methodist Church where hope is reborn, and where people are reconciled to one another and committed to build God’s beloved community.

“Let us imagine a church where no one, nobody, is marginalized,” Malone said. “Let us imagine a church that transcends geography and cultures and languages and borders and barriers and differences. I’m talking about a beautiful mosaic that reflects the kin-dom, the kingdom of God.”

Church apologizes for sexual misconduct

General Conference [issued a heartfelt apology to all who experienced sexual misconduct](#) in The United Methodist Church.

Submitted by the United Methodist Commission on the Status and Role of Women, the apology was part of a resolution passed in the last hour of General Conference on May 3.

Not only was the apology statement read in its entirety during General Conference, but all United Methodist bishops around the world are to read the apology at their own upcoming annual conferences.

Votes of note

- General Conference on April 30 [approved via consent calendar a resolution](#) asking that United Methodist institutions not buy government bonds from Israel, Turkey and Morocco, given that those nations have engaged in long-term military occupations. The resolution comes amid pro-Palestinian protests on U.S. college campuses and after a demonstration at General Conference, decrying Israel’s military operations in Gaza. Wespeth, the church’s pensions and investment agency, said it will carefully consider the non-binding measure.
- 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. Some of the petitions passed would direct churches to conduct annual audits of the carbon footprint of their buildings, grounds or facilities, encourage annual conference sessions to reduce energy waste and consumption, and update or readopt existing church resolutions on creation care.

And that’s a wrap. It’s a lot, even for those of us familiar with the system.

Since Crawford has been practicing full inclusion since we became a Reconciling Congregation under Eric Dupee’s ministry here, the changes on that front don’t affect us in practice, but knowing that the denomination to which we belong finally welcomes all clears the air and helps everyone here feel fully and truly at home.

The effect of the budgetary changes on local churches won’t be clear for a couple of years at least. And with a reduction in bishops, the lines of the New England Annual Conference might be redrawn yet again. Bishop Johnson is only here as an interim, and we will be getting a new bishop this fall, in any case.

Does anyone have anything they’d like to ask about what happened?