

A few notes from Pastor Eric on “A New Form of Unity” - Bard/Jones Plan

Background: David Bard is the resident bishop in Michigan and represents the progressive end of the church. Scott Jones is the bishop for the Texas Annual Conference (that’s the Houston area and East Texas; we’re in Rio Texas which is a separate bishop for the South Texas area), and Jones represents the conservative (or “traditionalist”) end of the church. Most churches and clergy fall somewhere in the middle, and have parishioners who would choose different ways forward sitting next to each other in the pews.

The problem: The General Conference of the UMC has argued about human sexuality - particularly whether we can have “practicing” LGBTQ clergy and perform same-sex weddings in our buildings or with our clergy - at every global meeting since 1972. Usually these happen every 4 years, but after 2016, we had a special commission and called session in 2019. There was hope that we would move forward to at the least a more contextual approach to LGBTQ inclusion. Instead ***a Traditionalist Plan passed narrowly (mostly due to conservative delegates in Africa, a rapidly growing part of the church) which mandates penalties for clergy performing same-sex weddings and required regional areas (“annual conferences”) which previously were not enforcing the rules in place to do so.***

This takes effect on January 1, 2020, and the regular every-4-years general conference will convene again in May 2020. Most of the US church has pushed back at the 2019 decisions through their elections at June 2019 annual conference meetings, and there is a broad consensus from many parts of the church that the May 2020 meeting needs to be about not coming to agreement on one “way forward,” but on splitting up the church into either 2 (so-called “traditional” on one side and “progressive” and centrist/“open” on the other) or 3 parts.

The so-called “divorce settlement” will have to address these issues and more about the things we share.

- our Wesleyan theological and missional tradition
- a shared “Book of Discipline” - our “rulebook” that only General Conference can edit when they meet for 2 weeks every 4 years; currently adaptable to contexts outside the US but not contextual for US churches
- bishops and itinerant pastors who are assigned and sent. UMC churches don’t “hire” pastors, but with input from both pastors and congregations, receive pastors assigned to them.
- “boards and agencies” - shared work in Global Ministries and Disaster Response (UMCOR), Church & Society, Higher Education and training/certifying pastors, a shared pension and health insurance plans, etc.
- all the churches support this work with “connectional giving” or “apportionments” - giving to work together on these shared tasks
- our physical property is shared. Each congregation holds their building and assets in trust for its Annual Conference (our “Rio Texas Conference” in South Texas), but it belongs to the larger church.

The question this Bard/Jones “New Form of Unity” plan addresses is what an amicable separation might look like, instead of one group either leaving or getting kicked out. Under this proposal, **each annual conference would decide which of the 2 or 3 branches they would be in, and then individual pastors and congregations would decide whether to stay in their geographic annual conference or affiliate with a different annual conference** where they share theological commitments and practices on inclusion but they may not share geography in the same way. **Note the timeline on the last page.**

Bring your questions to our way forward conversations on August 11, September 8 and September 22, as we prepare for an all-church meeting on October 6. Contact Pastor Eric, Pastor Valerie, Kathleen Laborde, or Brock Curry with thoughts and questions.