



Photo by Mike DuBose, United Methodist Communications

The Commission considered all relevant passages in the Book of Discipline to help us find a way forward.

The Commission on a Way Forward report: What you should know

A UMC.org Feature by Joe Iovino*

Understanding what United Methodists will consider at the Special Session of General Conference, February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri, can be confusing. Because the work is “limited to receiving and acting upon a report from the Commission on a Way Forward based upon the recommendations of the Council of Bishops,” that report is a great place to start.

The report of the Commission on a Way Forward (COWF) is available free online in each of the official languages of The United Methodist Church ([English](#) | [French](#) | [Portuguese](#) | [Swahili](#)), making it readily available to all United Methodists.

When opening the report, it is tempting to skip ahead to the proposed plans and legislation. But taking the time to read the context, history and background information the Commission provides, leads to a better understanding of the recommendations.



“The Commission met nine times over seventeen months” to do the work of exploring ways forward for The United Methodist Church. File photo by Maidstone Mulenga, United Methodist Council of Bishops.

1. Preface, History and Historical Context

The report begins by stating that it is “submitted out of a desire to serve our whole church and particularly the delegations who will gather in February, 2019.”

“The Commission’s purpose was never to arrive at uniformity of thought among its own members or to design the shape the church should take in the future,” the report continues. “The purpose has been to help the Council of Bishops and the General Conference to do this work of decision-making.”

COWF was never intended to be a legislative body tasked with submitting a single way forward. Instead, they were formed to study the issues about which we disagree, and make recommendations to help us find a way forward.

2. Key Foundational Ideas

Nine “Key Foundational Ideas” helped shape their work. The list includes things that unite us and acknowledges where we disagree.

COWF read together *The Anatomy of Peace*, a book that helped the Commission frame their discussions and disagreements. In “A Heart at Peace,” Bishop Grant Hagiya shares important ideas from the book (*Circuit Rider special edition*).

Prayer continues to be central to the work. COWF, the Council of Bishops, and many United Methodists have prayed throughout this time and will continue to pray through the 2019 General Conference sessions.

3. Methods, history, and the mission, vision and scope of their work

“The Commission met nine times over seventeen months” in United Methodist facilities. They studied the Bible together. They consulted with United Methodist boards, agencies, institutions, and advocacy groups. They researched how other denominations have worked through similar conversations.

The Commission’s mission is to help us find a way forward, with a vision toward maximizing The United Methodist Church’s presence in the world, while allowing for “contextual differentiation.” This includes balancing a desire to allow for “different theological understandings” with “as much unity as possible.”

The scope of COWF considered many possibilities, looking at all aspects of our life together as a Church. “If we do this work with complete surrender to God’s unlimited imagination and kingdom purposes,” the report asserts, “we will be blessed beyond our limited human imagination.”



Prayer is integral to the work of the Commission on a Way Forward, the Council of Bishops (pictured), and The United Methodist Church. File photo courtesy the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

4. Theological and Missional Frameworks

Robust theological and missional frameworks guide their work. The theological framework addresses who United Methodists are as part of the Christian church, while the missional framework expresses our commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

5. Legislation

Finally, after explaining how COWF functioned, the report turns to “A Conversation within the Commission on a Way Forward,” which contains the proposed plans.

The One Church Plan, endorsed by the Council of Bishops, would allow but not require United Methodist clergy to perform same-gender weddings where legal, and allow but not require annual conferences to ordain LGBTQ pastors. “The One Church Plan is built on the belief that it is possible to live with more space while we focus on our common mission,” the report states.

The Connectional Conference Plan would create “three values-based connectional conferences” in the U.S., and provide for central conferences to align with one of those connectional conferences or become one of their own. According to the report, the “Connectional Conference Plan addresses the reality of the UMC as it is now.”

The Traditionalist Plan is mentioned in the report, but details written by “a few members of the Council of Bishops” appear in appendix 3. “The Traditional Model maintains our global United Methodist teaching on human sexuality,” the plan states.

COWF considered a traditionalist plan but discontinued work on it because it received “modest support” from both COWF and Council of Bishops. When the bishops later asked COWF to include a Traditionalist Plan, “the time available did not allow for the full conciliar process utilized for the other two plans.”

Other plans that are not part of the COWF report have been submitted by others for consideration by the Special Session of General Conference.

Read United Methodist News Service’s introduction to the plans.

6. Appendices

Appendix 1 addresses COWF’s conversations about “the possibility of churches desiring to change their relationship with The United Methodist Church,” which are sometimes called “exit paths.”



The Commission on a Way Forward report will be received and considered by General Conference, February 23-26, 2019. File photo of General Conference 2016 by Mike DuBose, United Methodist Communications.

Appendix 2 shares about COWF's relationship to the Council of Bishops, including how a Judicial Council ruling after the final COWF meeting changed the audience of the report. COWF "understood that the Commission was doing its work on behalf of the Council of Bishops." They expected to submit their report to the Council of Bishops who would then report to General Conference, but the Judicial Council determined COWF is to report directly to General Conference.

Appendix 3 is the Traditional Plan explained above.

Appendix 4 is a resource from Wespath Benefits and Investments to help United Methodists understand the pension impacts of the COWF proposals.

Finding a way forward

The Report of the Commission on a Way Forward details the work of the Commission to help United Methodists find a way forward. Reading it will help you understand the task of the Special Session of General Conference in February 2019, a historic moment for our denomination.

**Joe Iovino works for UMC.org at United Methodist Communications. Contact him by email or at 615-312-3733.*

This story was published September 6, 2018.



Winnie was tired of flying solo.
She had to get a wing man soon.

United Methodist Communications is your
"wingman" when it comes to helping you
share the story of your congregation.

UMCom.org