

Another GC2020 Delay Brings Relief, Chagrin

By Heather Hahn

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General Conference delegates expressed mixed emotions after a second postponement pushed the denomination's top lawmaking assembly to next year.

While many delegates see the second postponement as the only just course of action, at least some expressed frustration that so many big decisions remain up in the air.

With COVID-19 still menacing the globe, the Commission on the General Conference [again has rescheduled the United Methodist meeting — this time to Aug. 29-Sept. 6, 2022, in Minneapolis](#). The global gathering originally was set to take place in May 2020.

In the meantime, the Council of Bishops [has called a special virtual General Conference session on May 8](#). However, that brief online meeting is scheduled only to open the way for delegates to vote by mail on a very limited agenda that bishops say is needed for administrative functioning.

On pause for now are plans to split The United Methodist Church, as well as any potential end to official church restrictions related to LGBTQ individuals.

“I am not happy about this postponement because we have so much work to do, and many people want to see an end to the ongoing debate about a split in the UMC,” said the Rev. Anne-Marie Detjen, a veteran delegate and pastor in Hamburg, Germany. “But I see the need as the coronavirus pandemic is still impacting worldwide travel.”

New dates pose challenges

The new dates for General Conference overlap with the World Council of Churches Assembly, scheduled for Aug. 31-Sept. 8, 2022, in Karlsruhe, Germany.

Bishop Sally Dyck, the Council of Bishops ecumenical officer, is among the United Methodist leaders who would be expected to be at both events.

“United Methodists have had a strong presence and participation at the Assembly and for that to be potentially diminished is very unfortunate,” she said. “Nevertheless, we will still provide leadership, presence and participation at the assembly in Germany.”

The postponed General Conference now closely follows the World Methodist Conference on Aug. 10-14, 2022, in Gothenburg, Sweden. The conference brings together representatives from denominations around the globe that carry on the Wesleyan tradition. Dyck thinks that it’s still doable for delegates to attend both events.

“I want to make it clear that the overlapping of the Assembly and the General Conference in no way represents a diminished commitment to ecumenism or our ecumenical partners,” she said. “The UMC has historically and is constitutionally committed — as well as relationally committed — to ecumenism. While The UMC has turned inward, ecumenism is essential for the witness and mission of the Church universal and also The UMC.”

The extended delay adds to anxieties that church members already feel around General Conference, said the Rev. George K. Weagba, another veteran delegate. Still, he urged United Methodists to consider what God might want them to learn in this moment.

“I think the Lord wants us to learn to be more patient as we look forward to the future of the church,” said Weagba, vice president at United Methodist University of Liberia and [an author of a book on conflict resolution](#). “This patience has to do with bearing with one another, enduring unpleasant situations and even unpleasant people for the sake of Christ.”

The Rev. Byron E. Thomas, chair of the North Georgia Conference delegation, offered a similar assessment. The decision to postpone “places a premium on justice,” he said, by preventing disenfranchisement of duly elected delegates around the four continents where the church is present.

“While there may be some who are anxious to move forward quickly, a sober approach whereby we attend to one of the great traditions of our Christian faith — ‘waiting on the Lord’ — I believe will result in unforeseen and unanticipated blessings,” said Thomas, senior pastor of Ben Hill United Methodist Church in Atlanta.

Still, that doesn’t make the wait any easier.

“While I understand the reasoning, this second postponement only prolongs the harm being done to people in the LGBT+ community by the current policies and practices of The United Methodist Church,” said the Rev. Andy Bryan, chair of the Missouri Conference delegation and lead pastor of Manchester United Methodist Church in Missouri.

He also expressed disappointment that the denomination could not come up with a way for General Conference to meet in this season.

Last fall, the General Conference commission named a technology study team to look at virtual options that would ensure full participation of delegates.

In [its report to the commission](#), the team concluded and the commission agreed that no virtual solution could overcome obstacles that include a 16-hour time difference across the denomination, inequities in internet access and the need for vote security.

The Reconciling Ministries Network, an advocacy group for LGBTQ equality in the church, said justice requires United Methodists to hold tight. “Although these are painful decisions that prolong oppression, they were also the only right decisions to make,” [the group said in a statement](#).

Decades of conflict over LGBTQ inclusion culminated in the [contentious 2019 special General Conference in St. Louis](#) that reinforced church bans on same-gender weddings and “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy. However, the relatively narrow 438-384 vote did not end the denomination’s conflict.

That led a diverse group of church leaders to put forward the [Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation](#). The mediated agreement allows theological traditionalists — those who want to maintain church restrictions — who desire to do so to leave with church property and \$25 million in church funds to start their own denomination. The protocol also sets aside \$2 million for other departing denominations.

On March 1, traditionalists announced [the name for the new denomination would be Global Methodist Church](#) but acknowledged that their current plans for now hinge on General Conference’s approval of the protocol.

The Rev. Keith Boyette of the Wesleyan Covenant Association — the advocacy group midwifing the new church — urged bishops to add the Protocol among the slate to be voted on in the May 8 virtual meeting.

“The Protocol remains the best way forward to amicably resolve the deep divisions in the UM Church,” Boyette said [in a statement](#). “It is the only way to avoid protracted and expensive litigation, ensure that unfunded pension liabilities will be addressed, and enable the church to move beyond decades of conflict.”

The Rev. Jim Cowart, the head of the South Georgia Conference delegation who has been involved in the WCA, echoed that sentiment. “Before the pandemic, we were fighting a low level of trust throughout the UM Church,” said Cowart, co-pastor of Harvest Church in Byron, Ga. “Delays of dealing with separation, even delays caused by a pandemic, if not addressed, can easily be seen as kicking the can down the road.”

The Liberation Methodist Connexion is [a new progressive denomination that’s getting off the ground](#).

“We hope to be a spiritual home for marginalized persons that provides them rest and renewal,” said Adrian Hill, a Northern Illinois Conference delegate and member of the new group. “While we pray that the UMC ultimately receives the clarity it is seeking, the LMX does not make decisions with an eye towards UMC matters nor any other denominational meetings.”

In this time of uncertainty, the Protocol also urges bishops to hold in abeyance any complaints related to the denomination’s restrictions around LGBTQ inclusion. While that request does not have the force of church law, [a number of bishops have agreed to the request](#).

UMCNext, a group that helped negotiate the Protocol and remains committed to strengthening the global United Methodist Church, calls on all bishops [“to continue the abeyance to avoid further harm.”](#)

Simon Mafunda, a veteran delegate from the Zimbabwe East Conference, said he believes the Protocol, despite some faults, offers the best solution to move forward. Still, he said it could be in United Methodists' best interests to wait.

"This second postponement may bring about new insights, new approaches or engagements," he said. "All those who had already taken positions may start thinking again."

However, Jessica Vittorio — a North Texas Conference delegate — raised concerns that the further delay will only lead more U.S. churches to exit without the Protocol's structure. She also remains concerned that the new General Conference dates, [just as with the previous reschedule](#), continue to conflict with the start of the academic year.

The Rev. Ande Emmanuel, a delegate from Nigeria, [is part of an African group seeking United Methodist unity](#).

"For some of us in Africa, the Protocol plan is not a priority," he said. "Hence its delay wouldn't have any impact in Africa."

He suggested that those who wish to leave The United Methodist Church do so under already existing church policies for congregational departures.

"Let's be patient and wait until it is safe to have in-person General Conference," he said. "It doesn't matter how long this may take."

The Rev. Cristine "Tintin" Carnate-Atrero, a reserve delegate from the West Middle Philippines Conference, said she intends to be a good steward of time during this delay. She is among "Out of Chaos, Creation," an international group of delegates who hope to use the delay to cast a new vision for The United Methodist Church.

"God is bringing us into a process of discernment rather than in decision-making as we usually do," she said. "This second postponement is conveying a strong message of listening rather than debating, praying rather than arguing, discerning rather than discussing."

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