

Pandemic Challenges for General Conference

By Walter Fenton – Wesleyan Covenant Association – January 29, 2021

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The United Methodist Church's next General Conference will meet in Minneapolis, Minnesota, August 29 – September 7, 2021. Or will it?

Postponed once already due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is possible the quadrennial conference could be postponed again. The Commission on General Conference, the body responsible for planning the ten day meeting, has indicated it continues to plan as if the conference will meet this year as scheduled. However, Commission members readily acknowledge the state of the pandemic could derail their plans again. Presently, many countries have imposed stiff travel restrictions on those attempting to cross their borders. And while vaccines are now available to fight the pandemic, there is no guarantee they will sufficiently stem the tide by late August.

Among many matters before the next General Conference, the most important is legislation calling for the implementing of the [Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#). Negotiated by 16 UM Church leaders, the Protocol calls on the conference delegates to adopt an amicable division of the denomination. The plan has been endorsed by episcopal leaders and advocacy groups representing centrists, progressives, and traditionalists. Many United Methodists believed the plan would have passed last year had the General Conference convened in May 2020 as originally scheduled.

Commission leaders are exploring ways to leverage communications technology that would allow it to proceed with the conference this year. Among various options, it is considering a hybrid model where some delegates could meet in Minneapolis and others could join via live-streaming. And it is also contemplating an entirely virtual conference where delegates could take-up a few critical agenda items during a compressed schedule spanning just two or three days.

“We realize that time is of the essence. However, the reality is that there are parts of the *Book of Discipline* that do not speak to the issues raised during a pandemic,” said Commission chairwoman Kim Simpson in a [December press release](#). “There are still a lot of unknown factors and we will have to make a best informed decision with what we have and trust God to guide us to do the best we can for The United Methodist Church.”

Amid reports of declining worship attendance and significant budget cuts at the general church level the Commission is well aware of the urgency of holding some kind of General Conference this year so critical decisions can be made. By the end of January the Commission will receive a report from a designated Technology Study Team on potential ways to move forward with a conference this year. While technology does offer potential innovative solutions, the Commission is still faced with trying to make sure delegates from time zones around the world and with varying degrees of communication resources can participate equally in a General Conference.

“There have been no final decisions yet made about the format, timing or scope of the General Conference,” said the Rev. Joe DiPaolo, a Commission member who also serves on the Wesleyan Covenant Association’s Global Council and is the senior pastor at Lancaster First UM Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. “Commission members will utilize the report of the Technology Study Team in preparing for our upcoming General Conference. We understand the sense of urgency felt by many to make decisions as soon as possible. We are working very hard to balance the need for our delegates around the globe to have their voices heard against the very real public health crisis and the reality of technological limitations and access.”

The WCA, along with leading bishops and advocacy groups of all persuasions, continues to support the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation. The WCA also believes it is in the best interest of all parties to approve the Protocol’s implementing legislation as soon as possible so centrists, progressives, and traditionalists can plan accordingly for the creation of new denominations. Traditionalists from around the world, including the WCA, are prepared to launch a new, global Methodist church once the Protocol is passed, and it is aware that centrists and progressive are making similar plans for other denominations.

“At this juncture, we’re all somewhat stymied by the pandemic,” said the Rev. Keith Boyette, WCA President. “The uncertainty of a delayed General Conference is frustrating for local churches, annual conferences, and for the general church. We all know it’s not healthy to remain in this suspended state for much longer; I trust we’ll find a creative way to allow people to move forward sooner than later. Having said that, we certainly understand the difficult challenges confronting the Commission on General Conference; we need to keep its members and staff in our thoughts and prayers.”

The Commission is scheduled to hold a virtual meeting on Saturday, February 20, 2021, and it is possible it will share a definitive decision regarding the status of the next General Conference shortly after its meeting.

The Rev. Walter Fenton is Vice President for Strategic Engagement for the Wesleyan Covenant Association and is an elder in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference.