

United Methodist bishops encourage local option for same-sex marriage

The bishops recommended removing prohibitions on same-sex marriage and LGBT clergy in the global denomination's Book of Discipline—while allowing new regional rules.

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue



Cynthia F. Harvey (right) of the United Methodist Council of Bishops answers questions about the UMC's Way Forward plan at the conclusion of the bishops' meeting in Chicago. She is flanked by Bishops Bruce R. Ough (left) and Kenneth H. Carter (center). Photo by Mike DuBose, UMNS.

The bishops of the United Methodist Church have endorsed a plan that would allow individual pastors and regional bodies to make their own decisions on whether to perform same-sex weddings and ordain LGBT people as clergy.

The Council of Bishops recommended the One Church Plan on May 4 after nearly a week of meetings in Chicago, [according to a council press release](#).

“The Council’s prayerful deliberation reflected the diversity of the global denomination on the matter of homosexuality and many other matters,” Kenneth Carter, president of the Council of Bishops, said in the release. “With convicted humility, bishops want to be pastors and shepherds of the whole church in order to maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible and with as much contextual differentiation as possible.”

The denomination’s rulebook, the Book of Discipline, states that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” cannot be ordained as ministers, appointed to serve, or married in the church.

The One Church Plan would remove that controversial language from the Book of Discipline, according to the council. It also would safeguard pastors and conferences unwilling to perform same-sex weddings or ordain LGBT people because of their theological convictions.

Differing views on what it means to include LGBT people have roiled the second-largest Protestant denomination in the United States, drawing to a stalemate at a contentious meeting of global delegates at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon.

Bishops there announced the creation of a 32-member commission that would make recommendations to settle questions of ordination and marriage at a special session of the General Conference to be held in February in St. Louis. Carter was one of the moderators of that commission.

But since the 2016 meeting, many of UMC’s smaller U.S. jurisdictions and regional bodies, called annual conferences, have made their own decisions regarding LGBT clergy. Last year, the Mountain Sky Conference elected Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian woman, as the denomination’s first openly gay or lesbian bishop.

For more than 20 years, individual pastors have publicly or secretly celebrated same-sex unions and, more recently, legal weddings. Several were tried in church courts, and some were stripped of their ordination credentials.

The One Church Plan is one of three proposed by the commission. Others are the Traditionalist Plan and the Connectional Conference Plan.

“The Traditionalist Plan would affirm the current language in the denomination’s Book of Discipline,” United Methodist News Service wrote, “and seek to strengthen enforcement.”

The Connectional Conference Plan would provide options for affiliating with a larger body of congregations based on “theology or perspective on LGBTQ ministry,” UMNS wrote, noting that this would require changes to the denomination’s constitution.

The bishops will submit a report to the special session including all three plans, but they will recommend the One Church Plan.

Further details about the plans will not be available until July 8, by which date the full report for General Conference delegates is expected to be released, according to the council. The proposed legislation will be translated into the other official languages of the General Conference: French, Portuguese, and Swahili.

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