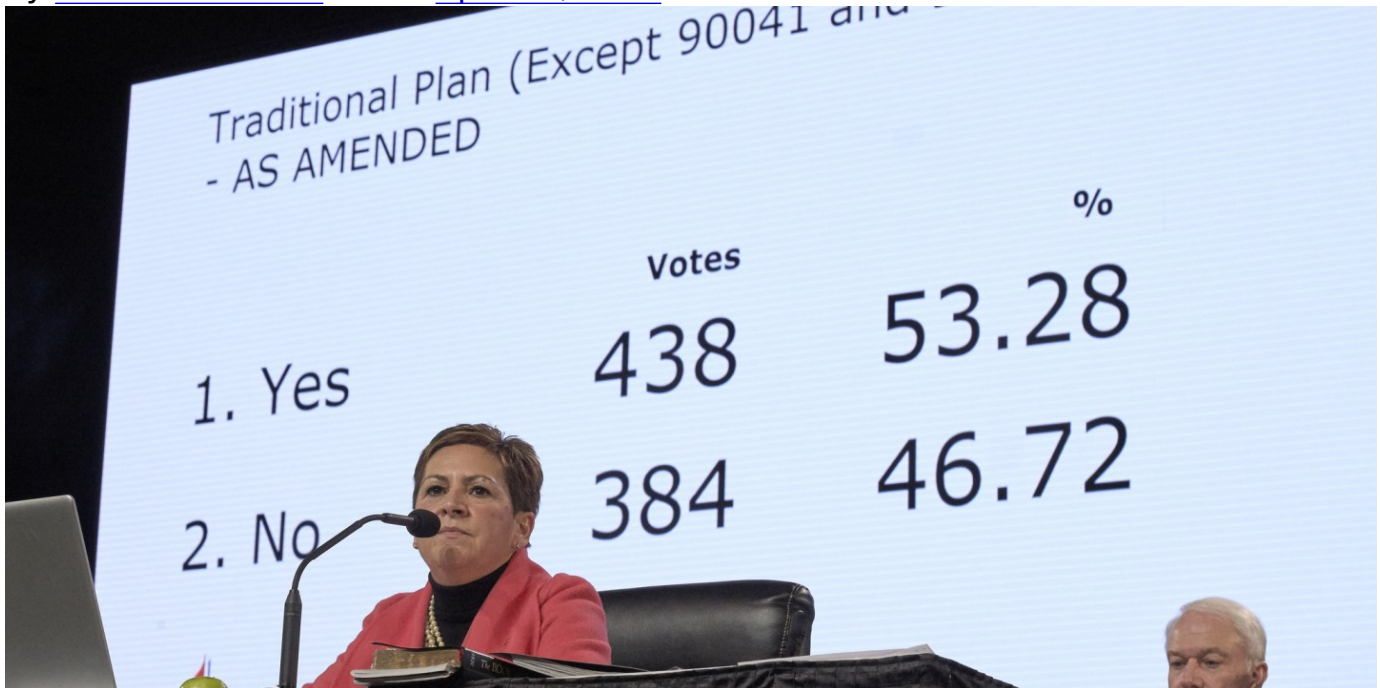


The United Methodist meeting offered no clear way forward. What now?

The UMC, a global church, prides itself on its democratic and decentralized polity. All this shapes its response to LGBTQ couples and clergy.

by [Anne Burkholder](#) in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue



Cynthia Fierro Harvey, president-designate of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, observes the results from the vote on keeping the denomination's rules on LGBTQ marriage and clergy at a legislative assembly in St. Louis on February 26, 2019. Photo by Paul Jeffrey, UMNS.

The special General Conference of the United Methodist Church in February was more of a pivot point than the finale in the denomination's long debate about the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of congregations and ordained leadership. The assembly adopted by a 438-384 vote the so-called Traditional Plan, which excludes LGBTQ persons from ordained leadership and prohibits ministers from officiating at same-sex marriages. But the plan's major enforcement provisions were ruled unconstitutional by the church's Judicial Council, making the results of the vote far

from decisive. Furthermore, the UMC has another general conference looming in May 2020 at which this year's vote could be overturned and another approach could emerge.

The UMC prides itself on its democratic, decentralized structure, and its deliberations on this issue have revealed the several interworking dimensions of UMC governance. The first of the church's three largest decision-making bodies is the Council of Bishops, made up of all UMC bishops throughout the world. The church's legislative body is the General Conference, which meets every four years and is made up of elected delegates (half clergy, half lay) from each regional body (what Methodists call an annual conference). A third body, the Judicial Council, determines the constitutionality of matters referred to it by the COB and the GC.

The debate is also shaped by the fact that the UMC is a global church. It includes not only the 54 annual conferences in the United States—clustered into five jurisdictions—with a total of about 7 million members, but also 75 conferences—clustered into seven bodies known as “central conferences”—in Europe, Eurasia, the Philippines, and Africa, with about 5.7 million members. Many General Conference delegates come from countries where being gay is illegal or where gays are persecuted. In the United States, support for LGBTQ inclusion has gained steadily since 2014, when the Pew Research study found that 60 percent of United Methodists in the country supported same-sex marriage.

The fundamental question before the church remains: Can the unity of the church be maintained while formally acknowledging the diversity of opinion within its various regions? The vote at the General Conference asserted by a slim margin that unity must be maintained through unanimity of belief with regard to LGBTQ issues.

Yet seven parts of the Traditional Plan were ruled unconstitutional by the JC both before and during the special meeting. Three of these measures attempted to create procedures within the COB for disciplining bishops who flouted the rules. These measures were ruled unconstitutional because they would allow bishops who file complaints about other bishops to be part of the group that determines the penalty—in effect, allowing bishops to be both prosecutor and judge. The JC also ruled that in trying to turn the COB into a global committee for disciplining bishops, it trampled on the existing episcopal structure, in which bishops are elected from various jurisdictions and are accountable to disciplinary procedures in their respective jurisdictions.

Four other elements of the plan would have required bishops and annual conference boards of ordained ministry to certify that their members and ordination applicants are not “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” The JC ruled that this provision improperly made sexuality more decisive than any other criterion in assessing a candidate for ministry.

In April, the Judicial Council will review the Traditional Plan yet one more time. It may decide that the plan itself is now out of order in light of the fact that, having been stripped of enforcement provisions, it is no longer the plan that delegates voted for.

If the Traditional Plan does go into effect—which would happen in January 2020—it would specify penalties for ministers who officiate at same-sex unions or marriages. It would also prohibit bishops from consecrating LGBTQ bishops and from commissioning and ordaining LGBTQ persons. The plan also tightens up legal procedures for addressing such cases.

In that event, UMC churches in conservative parts of the country are likely to see more formal complaints and trials. But jurisdictions in other parts of the country, where there is widespread opposition to current prohibitions, will see little change. They are likely to continue—or expand—their current practice of disobeying the rules against the inclusion of LGBTQ people. Nothing in the Traditional Plan as currently constituted prevents those acts of disobedience. Members of individual jurisdictions are still responsible to those jurisdictions, not to a global enforcement body.

Before the special assembly, activists on the traditionalist side, led by the Wesleyan Covenant Association, rallied support for the Traditional Plan among delegates outside the United States. They also laid the groundwork for making it easier (and less expensive) for congregations to leave the denomination. However, in February the WCA stated that its members would remain in the church through the 2020 General Conference, while being “prepared to launch a new Methodist movement.”

Many conservatives are disappointed with how the Judicial Council stripped the plan of enforcement mechanisms, and some will leave the denomination. Others will continue the fight for more traditionalist elements and for favorable terms for leaving the denomination. It is unlikely that they will try to change the church’s constitution—they know they lack the votes for that. Amendments to the constitution require a two-thirds vote in General Conference as well as a two-thirds aggregate vote of all delegates in all annual conferences.

Judging from speeches on the floor and postconference statements, I suspect that the sleeping giant of UMC centrists in the United States has awakened. Conversations among leaders won't begin in earnest until after the Judicial Council's April ruling, but I expect centrists—those who want to allow for diverse views within the church—to recommend new legislation in 2020, including a plan for the formal division of the church, at least in the United States.

In preparation for the 2020 General Conference, every annual conference will elect new delegates this coming summer. Legislative proposals will be formalized by September.

One proposal being floated would establish several new central conferences in the United States that would be defined not geographically but by their progressive or traditionalist stance. Like the seven central conferences that exist outside the United States, these U.S. central conferences would have the ability to reformulate the church's Book of Discipline according to their own practice. In effect, these conferences in the U.S. would gain the same flexibility in formulating their own procedures that those outside the U.S. already enjoy. (An oddity in the current situation is that delegates to General Conference from outside the U.S. are voting on a version of the Book of Discipline that they themselves are not obliged to obey.)

Perhaps in the months ahead the Holy Spirit will intercede with a new vision for unity in the midst of diversity. Or perhaps some form of healthy division will emerge. If not, the attrition in the U.S. church will continue until only a remnant remains. The question, in that case, is whether the remnant will be made up of progressives or conservatives.

This article was edited on March 22, 2019. A version of it appears in the print edition under the title "Unsettled Methodists."