

General Conference 101: All you ever wanted to know

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NOTE: Photographs are available at <http://umns.umc.org>.

A UMNS Report
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The United Methodist Church's top legislative assembly, the General Conference, will meet in 2008 to set direction for the denomination for the following four years. This guide provides an overview of the gathering, how it works and its significance in the life of the church.

What is General Conference?

As the top policy-making body of the international United Methodist Church, General Conference is the only body that officially speaks for the 11.5-million member denomination (13 million if including baptized children who have not become members).

During the nine-day session, 992 delegates will revise the Book of Discipline, which regulates the manner in which local churches, annual conferences and general agencies are organized. The book also sets policies regarding church membership, ordination, administration, property and judicial procedures. The assembly may modify most disciplinary paragraphs by majority vote, but the Constitution can only be amended by a two-thirds affirmative vote, followed by a two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of members voting in annual conference session. Delegates may not revoke or change the Articles of Religion or the Confession of Faith unless two-thirds of the delegates agree to change this provision and three-fourths of the annual conference members also agree.

Delegates also revise the Book of Resolutions, a volume declaring the church's stance on a wide variety of social justice issues. The book contains more than 300 resolutions that are considered instructive and persuasive, but are not binding on members.

Where does the conference meet?

Meeting sites rotate among the church's five geographic U.S. jurisdictions. The conference was held in 1996 in Denver (Western Jurisdiction), in 2000 in Cleveland (North Central Jurisdiction), and in 2004 in Pittsburgh (Northeastern Jurisdiction).

The 2008 conference will be in Fort Worth, Texas (South Central Jurisdiction). The 2012 gathering is scheduled for Tampa, Fla. (Southeastern Jurisdiction). There is nothing prohibiting future General Conferences from being scheduled outside the United States.

When will the gathering be held?

The assembly meets once every four years in the months of April or May unless a special session to deal with a particular issue is called by the Council of Bishops or General Conference.

The next session will be April 23-May 2, 2008. The nine-day session is two fewer than in the preceding quadrennium, reducing the cost of the assembly by \$163,000. Normally, delegates have a free day on Sunday, but delegates to the 2008 session will worship together in the morning and be back in legislative sessions or plenary for the remainder of the day. Central Texas Annual Conference, host of the assembly, will provide a special program on Sunday evening.

Who are the delegates?

The 992 delegates to the 2008 gathering are United Methodists elected by their annual conferences. Annual conferences consist of ordained clergypersons and an equal number of laypersons elected by their local churches.

Once every four years, annual conferences elect equal numbers of lay and clergy members to represent them at General Conference. Lay members vote for lay delegates and clergy for clergy delegates. The number of delegates from each conference is based on the number of clergy members and the number of lay members. However, even conferences with few lay and clergy members are guaranteed one clergy and one lay delegate. The Constitution permits General Conference to be composed of at least 600 and no more than 1,000 delegates.

Churches in the Southeastern Jurisdiction will have the largest number of delegates from the United States. However, because of membership increases in central conferences (outside the United States), that jurisdiction will have only 252 delegates, down from 278 at the 2004 gathering. North Central will have 138, down from 164; Northeastern, 126, down from 144; South Central, 148, down from 170; and Western, 40, down from 44.

The central conferences will have 278 delegates, up 100 from the 2004 assembly and up 136 from the gathering in 2000. Africa will be represented by 186 of the central conference delegates, up 94 from 2004. The 21 annual conferences in the Philippines will have 42 delegates. An additional 10 delegates will come from "concordat" churches with which the denomination has a formal relationship.

The number of U.S. delegates to the 2008 assembly would have decreased even more if Judicial Council had ruled that the 579,000-member Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) Methodist Church was a full member of the denomination. The 2004 General Conference accepted the African church as a member but declared the new annual conference would only be allowed one lay and one clergy delegate to the 2008 General Conference.

The secretary of General Conference normally would have allocated more than 40 delegates to Cote d'Ivoire, so the Commission on General Conference asked the denomination's top court to rule on the legality of assigning the conference only two delegates. In October 2006, the Judicial Council ruled that the Cote d'Ivoire Conference was not yet a full member of the denomination since other steps were contemplated in the membership process. Four of the seven Judicial Council members disagreed, but it takes six members to declare a General Conference action unconstitutional. The decision was reaffirmed in April 2007.

What does the assembly cost?

The projected cost of the 2008 session is \$6.6 million, compared with \$4.1 million for the 2000 conference and \$5.3 million for the 2004 session. Three percent of the cost is for committee functions and Commission on General Conference expenses; 9 percent covers the cost of the offices of the business manager, treasurer and the secretary of the General Conference; 24 percent is for operations; 18 percent for language services; and 46 percent for delegate expenses.

About \$1.6 million of the total \$6.6 million will pay delegate travel, and \$1.4 million will fund the cost of housing and food (each delegate will be given \$118 per diem). The Daily Christian Advocate will cost \$265,000 and the computer-tracking system will be \$230,000. Renting the convention center is expected to total \$99,000.

The Rev. Alan J. Morrison, a staff executive with the General Council on Finance and Administration, is responsible for managing the budget and handling hundreds of administrative details. "I don't know how anyone could do this ministry if they didn't feel a sense of call to do so," Morrison said. With help from the

host committee, the Commission on General Conference and others, he is responsible for coordinating some 4,000 marshals, pages, legislative assistants and other volunteers who help the assembly wade through approximately 2,000 legislative proposals. He will help recruit retired bishops and former delegates to serve as parliamentarians for each of the 13 legislative committees.

How does the legislative process work?

At General Conference, petitions will be considered first by one of 13 legislative committees (up from 11 in 2004) that may vote to adopt, reject or refer. The Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order is proposing to eliminate language of "concurrence or non-concurrence or concurrence as amended."

Most of the first four days is spent considering proposals in committees. During the second week, the entire gathering considers legislation proposed by the committees. A proposal coming from a committee is called a "calendar item."

Rules of General Conference are approved by delegates prior to any legislative actions. Rules proposed by the Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order will call for legislative committee calendar items with fewer than 10 negative votes to be placed on a "consent calendar." If an item is not removed by a written request of 20 delegates, and if it does not involve funding or a constitutional amendment, the entire consent calendar is approved with a single vote. General Conference may change the specific rules related to the consent calendar, but the process enables the assembly to quickly deal with hundreds of legislative proposals.

If a calendar item with financial implications is passed by a majority of delegates, it is referred to the General Council on Finance and Administration. Members of that agency return the legislation to a plenary session with a recommendation as to how the project or program is to be funded. Only after delegates approve or amend that recommendation is the legislation finally approved.

Prior to the conference, delegates receive an Advance Edition of the Daily Christian Advocate, containing the names of delegates and legislative committee assignments, reports from general agencies and all petitions. The edition is translated into Portuguese and French.

Each day during the conference, delegates receive an English edition of the Daily Christian Advocate containing the agenda, news, features, recommendations from legislative committees and a verbatim report of preceding plenary sessions. Those daily editions enable delegates to know which proposal is being debated and actions taken on previous days. By the end of the nine-day session, delegates will have received more than 2,500 DCA pages.

Plenary sessions are translated into German, French, Portuguese, Swahili, Spanish, Russian and Korean.

A computer-tracking system enables delegates and visitors to determine the status of any petition or calendar item.

The Commission on General Conference will suggest that, in the future, individuals must submit their petitions through local church charge conferences or other denominational organizations. A similar request was defeated by the 2004 gathering. The United Methodist Church is the only denomination allowing individuals to petition their legislative assembly.

What is the conference theme?

The theme of the 2008 General Conference will be "A Future With Hope."

"We're trying to move General Conference from what it now is--an exercise in the management of

petitions--to a genuine Christian conferencing with high quality conversation about the most important issues facing the church and the world," said Gail Murphy-Geiss, chairwoman of the Commission on General Conference. "We hope the conference will be more positive and unifying--a movement toward a 'future with hope.'" The commission is asking the conference to change the constitution to limit the number of delegates from a 1,000 maximum to a 600 maximum in order to increase dialogue and reduce costs.

The Rev. L. Fitzgerald "Gere" Reist, a clergy member of Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference, will serve as secretary of the legislative gathering. The former superintendent of the Williamsport District is receiving an appointment to extension ministry from the conference in order to serve as secretary. "I am awed by the discovery of how much my predecessor did," Reist told United Methodist News Service. "Carolyn Marshall set an example that I hope to be able to follow." Marshall served as secretary from 1992 through 2004.

Who are the presiding officers?

One of the denomination's 69 active bishops will preside over each plenary session. However, bishops cannot vote on any of the proposals and may speak to issues only after approval by a majority of delegates. Bishops are selected to preside by a committee of delegates, and a single bishop generally presides over only one plenary session. Since the assembly sometimes gets into some knotty parliamentary problems, presiding officers ask colleagues to serve as parliamentarians. Both active and retired bishops sit together behind the presiding officer.

How does the petition process work?

Any United Methodist individual or organization may petition General Conference. Each petition should only address one paragraph in the Book of Discipline or one subject in the Book of Resolutions. The petition should include a suggested topic, clear indication of the additions and deletions and whether financial costs are involved. Petitions may be sent by e-mail to petitions@umpublishing.org. Petitions may be sent by mail to Petitions Secretary Gary W. Graves, United Methodist General Conference, P.O. Box 188, Beaver Dam, KY 42320-0187. All petitions must be sent by Oct. 26, 2007. A hand-printed or typed petition that must be keyed into the DCA must be received by Sept. 1. For detailed information on submitting petitions, visit www.GC2008.umc.org.

Petitioners may include a 50-word maximum rationale for disciplinary petitions. The rationale will be placed only on the General Conference Web site.

How is hospitality provided at General Conference?

Some 4,000 people will serve in a variety of volunteer roles such as greeters, registration officials, marshals, pages, translators, hosts and hostesses, guides, drivers, musicians, technicians, reporters and emergency-response volunteers.

The Rev. Thomas Childs, director of host operations, told United Methodist News Service that nine teams will operate under the theme "Gracious Hospitality." The teams hope to "create an atmosphere of grace and civility that sets the stage for true Christian conferencing."

The teams, under the general leadership of Bishop Ben Chamness and host operations chairperson the Rev. Allen Goss, will provide special care for international delegates. They also will aid delegates who lose their luggage or experience housing problems.

Among other things, the teams plan to provide health screenings, a daily exercise program, a fun run and a prayer room and labyrinth. They will provide tours, information about restaurants and special services for bishops and their spouses. Cookies have been provided by host committees of preceding conferences, but recently convention center officials have expressed concern about food safety since they have no control

over who brings in the food or its contents. Stay tuned.

The host committee also will provide hospitality for a pre-conference session on Jan. 24-26 for news organizations and heads of delegations.

What is the Area Night?

The international award-winning Texas Boys Choir will perform on Sunday evening. The informal Texas-theme evening will include a general reception taking the place of the bishops' reception, which traditionally was held on the evening before sessions begin.

What will be the major speeches at General Conference?

Daily sessions begin with worship, and in the opening week there will be three speeches: an Episcopal address, Laity Address and a first-ever Young People's Address.

The Episcopal Address will be given by Illinois Area Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher on behalf of the Council of Bishops, which will approve the address before delivery.

The Laity Address will be delivered by Lyn Powell, lay leader of the North Georgia Conference and president of the Southeastern Jurisdiction's lay leader association. The title of her speech as approved by Annual Conference Lay Leaders will be "Hope for the Future: Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for a Transformed World." The address will be part of conference theme "A Future with Hope."

The Division on Ministries with Young People will select a youth speaker or speakers at its August meeting and will announce its selection on Sept. 1.

Many bishops will speak in Fort Worth area churches on the Sunday prior to the gathering.

Will delegates have an opportunity for orientation?

In an opening session, three general agencies (Commission on the Status and Role of Women, the Commission on Religion and Race and the Board of Global Ministries) will conduct a 20-minute training session to foster gender, racial and international inclusiveness. Presentations and a video will encourage delegates to allow time for translations, to respect cultural differences, and to include women, people of color and people from other nations in leadership positions.

Prior to their arrival in Fort Worth, delegates will receive a DVD explaining the rules and procedures for General Conference, an introduction to Fort Worth, the duties of legislative committee officers, tips on obtaining a visa to the United States and the importance of inclusiveness.

Prior to the gathering, the Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the Women's Division will hold an orientation session for women, and the Inter-Ethnic Strategy Development Group will hold a session for ethnic minorities.

What is the proposal for making the U.S. church a regional body?

United Methodist churches in the United States may become part of a regional body, similar to church units in Africa, Europe and Asia if the 2008 General Conference approves four constitutional amendments striking out language that says central conferences are only for areas of the church outside the United States.

If those amendments are approved by two-thirds of the delegates to General Conference and two-thirds of

the aggregate number of members attending annual conferences, the way would be cleared for the 2012 General Conference to introduce legislation creating a central conference for U.S. churches. The proposal, presented by a task force examining the global nature of the denomination, would allow central conferences to form or continue jurisdictions.

The proposal acknowledges the fact that 30 percent of United Methodist members now live outside the United States and legislation that could be proposed to the 2012 General Conference would eliminate U.S.-specific concerns from General Conference. Those concerns would become the business of a U.S. Central Conference.

The 2008 General Conference will be asked to allow the task force and the Connectional Table to jointly continue their study of the church's worldwide nature and report to the 2012 legislative assembly on the church's characteristics and how the United States could become a regional conference while retaining its five jurisdictions where bishops are elected.

How are seating assignments made?

With nearly 1,000 delegates, gaining the attention of the chair in order to speak to the assembly can be difficult. Therefore, seating assignments become very important.

Delegations seated in the back half of the assembly hall in Pittsburgh will be in the front half in Fort Worth. The Commission on General Conference places the names of 2004 delegations seated in the back half in a hat; commission members pull the names, with those first drawn gaining a seat on the front row. The names of delegations that occupied front row seats in 2004 are drawn only after the other names have been drawn. The delegation from Nigeria will be in the first row at the 2008 gathering.

*Peck is a retired clergy member of New York Annual Conference. He has attended 10 General Conference sessions, including four as editor of the Daily Christian Advocate. He served as an editor for United Methodist News Service at the 2004 assembly.