



Friends, we are not where we were!

5/7/2024

The dust has not settled, but it is clear and obvious that the United Methodist Church has changed. Some would argue that it has changed for the better, and others that it has changed for the worse. Your local church can and will make the decision on how the action of the General Conference affects your congregation.

My purpose in sharing with you is to try and unpack a few of the changes adopted by the General Conference, so that you might decide for yourself. Let me begin by sharing with you what has not changed.

Our mission mandate has not and will not change. Jesus gave us specific marching orders to, “make disciples.” This mission should anchor and inform our work in every local church throughout the IGRC.

Our doctrinal standards have not changed. The Bible is our standard for faith and practice and that will never change. Our denomination relies on the Articles of Religion, The Confession of Faith, along with Wesley’s Standard Sermons and Notes on the New Testament. These standards have not and will not change.

Our commitment to the local church and its ability to exercise control over its local ministry, in its own context, has not changed. No one is telling any local church what they must believe or proclaim. No one will send you a pastor that goes against the positions of your congregation. If you are a conservative church, you can continue being a conservative church. If you were hoping for a more progressive approach to ministry, the door has been opened for you to be more intentionally progressive.

We are a global church that remains in connection through our shared mission and ministry focus, around the world. That has not changed. The move toward regionalization is an attempt to allow each geographic region to deal with issues within their region of the world. This will allow for future conferences to be more focused on issues affecting each region. The passage of worldwide regionalization ensures that churches throughout the world may continue ministry in their own context.

Friends, the United Methodist Church is a worldwide church that stretches around the globe. We are not just a denomination in the United States. The challenge has been that most of our practices and policies are built around a context of ministry that is United States focused. It could also be stated that more conservative regions of our worldwide denomination were frustrated by some of the progressive changes made in the United States. Each region will now be able to focus ministry within their own context without hindering ministry in a region outside of their own. Here are a few things that were changed to help our global church.

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The General Conference affirmed that marriage is between a man and a woman but also offered, for those in the United States, that marriage can be between two consenting adults. This is a major change that now allows pastors and churches, in the USA, to allow same gender marriages. Pastors can still decide what weddings they will perform. No one will be forced to violate their own conscience. Local churches can decide what weddings are held in their churches and church owned facilities.

Annual Conference Trustees can, if they choose, set the terms for a “gracious exit” for churches that are no longer in harmony with the United Methodist Church. The IGRC will offer an opportunity for churches to enter a process for exercising a gracious exit. This process will be shared at the Annual Conference session in June 2024.

The General Conference voted to dismantle the system of jurisdictions in favor of a plan for regionalization. The jurisdictional system was a system based on racial separation that divided our denomination into geographical areas that had a separate jurisdiction for its black members. Because this is a constitutional change, every annual conference across the globe will vote to approve or not. Approval will need to approve by a two-thirds majority in the aggregate. Every church will have a vote through their lay and clergy delegates to annual conference.

Domestic violence is now a chargeable offense. Any form of abuse, rape, sexual harassment, or intimidation will not be tolerated, and the church will not be silent on these issues.

Apportionments will be lowered, and the amount of money requested from local churches and annual conferences will be reduced. The denomination is committed to restructuring its ministries so that more money can be kept in the local church.

Ordained Deacons now have full authority to administer the sacraments within their ministry contexts.

All prohibitive language around human sexuality was removed from the Book of Discipline. All candidates for ministry will be subject to an examination of their gifts and graces and not their sexual orientation.

This General Conference renewed our commitment to being a global church. This Conference also strengthened our commitment to Africa University and to maintaining mission and ministry efforts around the globe. Churches are encouraged to become more active in their local ministry settings.

I would like to encourage all our churches across the IGRC to lift-up Jesus. The survival of the United Methodist Church, and all churches representing Jesus Christ, depends on our continued faithfulness to preaching the Good News. The United Methodist Church has chosen to expand the table to be fully inclusive. Each church chooses how they will live out the Christian faith within their own context. Remember the words of the Lord, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

Let’s keep lifting Jesus!

Bishop Frank J. Beard