

General Conference: Discerning a Faithful Path Forward
Step 1: Pre-Conference Information Sessions

Purpose of the Handout

As a takeaway from our Information Sessions, this handout is intended to inform the congregation of Pender UMC about the United Methodist Church 2024 General Conference (GC) agenda, background, process, and summary of the priority issues that are expected to surface at the General Conference to be held from April 23 to May 3, 2024. The hope is that this information helps us each personally, and as a congregation of Jesus’ disciples, to be prepared and to respond faithfully.

This handout:

- Focuses on facilitating the congregation’s understanding of issues.
- Summarizes information from sources that are publicly available and are considered as reliable and credible.
- Attempts to characterize “Broad Voices” (i.e., groups or caucuses that share similar views) which appear to be present in this dialogue.¹
- Is not intended to advocate for or against any position for Pender United Methodist Church on any of the issues.

Decision making required will be a process, not a single event.

These information sessions represent Step 1 in an envisioned process. Based on the outcome of the General Conference, post-conference sessions will be held with the congregation to discuss the outcomes as well as implications and any required decisions going forward on the part of Pender United Methodist Church.

I. A Call to Prayer

In preparation for the General Conference and the journey that may progress afterwards, we ask that all be in prayer for God’s glory, grace & truth, and for wisdom to discern a faithful way forward for our denomination and for Pender UMC.

Prayer by each of us is essential now, during the General Conference, and going forward to discern a faithful path forward.

Specifically, please pray for:

- The UMC, including national and international leaders, clergy and laity, delegates to 2024 General Conference, and Congregations and members; and
- Pender UMC, including leaders, members & friends, and our witness in and outside the church.

¹ The summary of each “Broad Voice” is not meant to imply that all individuals within the broad group agree on all issues. The purpose is to capture what seems to be consensus topics within the group.

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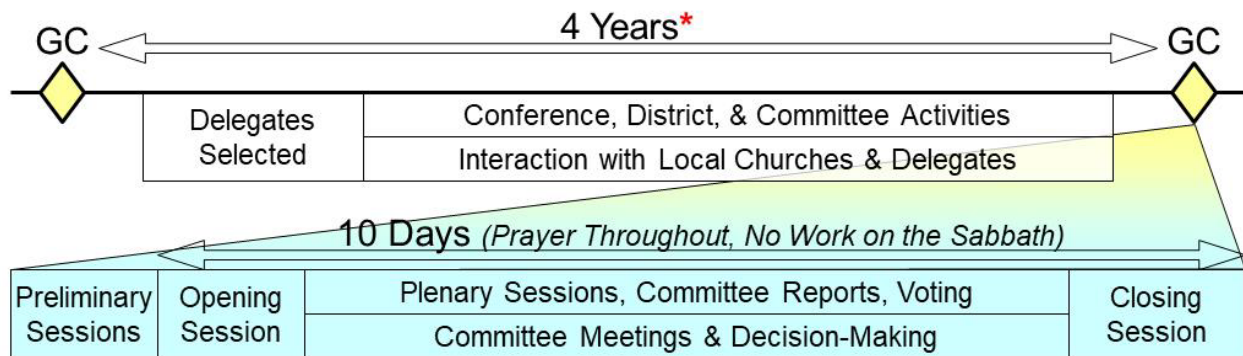
II. How did we get here?

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church is the quadrennial (i.e. every four years) gathering of lay and clergy representatives from across the entire global denomination who meet to worship, pray, consider missional priorities, and pass legislation to implement the church’s vision and mission through changes to the United Methodist Book of Discipline and, potentially, to the UM Constitution.

The 2024 General Conference represents the postponed 2020 Conference.

The 2024 General Conference represents the postponed General Conference that was scheduled for 2020. Because the 2024 General Conference fulfills the requirement for the 2020 Conference, in effect, the 2024 General Conference remains unfulfilled. Therefore, the Council of Bishops will call a special session of General Conference in 2026. Then the 2028 General Conference will convene as usual in 2028. Because of this, the proper reference to this year’s General Conference is the “2020 General Conference”. However, for clarity’s sake, at Pender, we continue to refer to this year as the 2024 General Conference.

As is illustrated notionally in the diagram below, the General Conference consists of a variety of sessions, beginning with an opening session, followed by plenary (business) and committee sessions, voting on key issues, and then ending with a closing ceremony. Each annual conference sends a predetermined number of lay and clergy delegates to General Conference.



III. Some Helpful Terms/Observations

Before continuing the discussion, some terms/observations which may be useful are provided below. Additional definitions are provided as part of the Key Issues/Priorities.

- Book of Discipline (BOD): The document of the church that “sets forth the laws, plan, polity, and process by which United Methodists govern themselves.” (BOD, p. v). The BOD may only be changed by the General Conference that meets every four years.

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- Social Principles: The Social Principles are social teachings of the Church contained in the BOD and is part of the Methodist tradition of addressing complex social issues of the day. The Social Principles section of the BOD is outlined at the end of this document.

Each group (i.e., African Delegation, Centrist/Progressives, Traditionalists) expresses a desire to follow a path that is faithful to God.

- African Delegation: While membership in the American UMC has declined, and has now suffered large losses due to disaffiliation, the church in Africa has grown rapidly. Between 40 and 45% of the delegates to the 2024 General Conference are expected to be international, with a high percentage of those from Africa. Within a few years, it is expected that there will be more African delegates to General Conference than from the U.S.
- Centrist/Progressives: A coalition of persons and churches who, on the one hand, identify as theologically, biblically, and socially moderate or “mainstream,” along with those who advocate for new and more progressive understandings and ways of living together as the church in the world. Centrist/Progressives believe that in the controversial issues to be discussed, the Church must change in these areas in order to remain faithful.
- Traditionalists: The name given to persons and churches who are committed to a historical consensus understanding and practice of Biblical and Wesleyan Christianity. Traditionalists believe that in the controversial issues to be discussed, the Church must maintain its traditional faith and practice in these areas in order remain faithful.

IV. Organizing the Discussion that is Preceding General Conference

The overall content of the General Conference can be found in the agenda that is available online (the URL is in the **Other Resources** section, below); voting will be a result of prayerful discussions at the GC, and the results will be made available after the GC.

The Voices

The issues being raised at this time are being advocated by loose coalitions, referred to as “Broad Voices,” captured as the “Centrist/Progressives,” the “Traditionalists,” and the “African

There are “Broad Voices” that agree on priorities while not always sharing consensus on the details themselves.

Delegation.” The priorities and stances on key issues for the Centrist/Progressives and the Traditionalists appear clearer than those of the African Delegation on some issues (i.e., some issues may not be a priority for the African Delegation, or the Delegation may not have a consensus position on an issue). On several issues, the African Delegation appears aligned with the Traditionalists.

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Key Issues & Priorities

The key issues and priorities that are anticipated to be part of the 2024 General Conference are: **A) Regionalization**; **B) “Prohibitive Language”**; **C) Social Principles**; and **D) Path for Disaffiliation**. Each is described below, including the corresponding posture of the Broad Voices. Because the Centrist/Progressive and the Traditional generally represent the spectrum of opinion, these groups are the focus of this section. The African Delegation’s position is reflected in the summary.

**There are several
priority issues
expected to be raised,
though the
Conference agenda
may be fluid.**

- A. REGIONALIZATION:** The question before General Conference 2024 is: *Will the General Conference change the structure of our worldwide connection by dividing the church into several new regions, each with its own specific rules for regional governance but united by a shared Book of Discipline?* If passed, this legislation would require changes to our church Constitution, and thus would also require approval by every annual conference in the denomination. As such, a Book of Discipline will continue to keep us connected. However, there will be aspects, currently in the Discipline, that will be under the jurisdiction of each specific region.
- Centrist-Progressives advocate for regionalization arguing that it will enable each world area to be more culturally contextual in its ministry, while allowing for differences elsewhere.
 - Traditionalists oppose this change arguing that it will weaken our connection and marginalize the voice and influence of African United Methodists who will soon be in the majority.
- B. “PROHIBITIVE LANGUAGE”:** The question before General Conference 2024 is: *Will the General Conference remove from the 2016 UM BOD the language (1) declaring “the practice of homosexuality” to be “incompatible with Christian teaching” (par. 161.G²), (2) prohibiting “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from being ordained and appointed as clergy (par. 304.3), and (3) defining marriage as “the union of one man and one woman” (par. 161.C)?*
- Centrist-Progressives support the removal of these sections of the BOD as discriminatory and harmful, and advocate for “full inclusion” of homosexual and LGBTQIA+ persons in the life of the church.

² The BOD paragraphs specifically referred to in this document are provided at the end of the document, in the “Other Resources” section.

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- Traditionalists argue that the disciplinary language is in harmony with Scripture and Christian tradition, and is consistent with our affirmation that “all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God.” (par. 161.G)

C. SOCIAL PRINCIPLES: The Social Principles (pars. 160-166) represent the commitment of the UMC “to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound Biblical and theological foundation” (preface). The question before General Conference 2024 is: *Will the General Conference approve a rewrite of our Social Principles that could alter our understanding and commitment to vital and sometimes disputed social issues of our time?*

- Representatives of the Centrist-Progressive coalition have composed and advocated for a proposed revision to the Social Principles (40+ page pdf available in several languages at <https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/proposed-revised-social-principles-for-general-conference-charlotte>). These changes are a stated priority of the coalition.
- Traditionalists share the church’s commitment to our shared social witness on pressing matters of the day, but resist many of the “liberalizing” changes to United Methodist statements about sexuality, marriage, abortion, etc.

D. A NEW PATH FOR DISAFFILIATION: From 2019-2024, 25% of the United Methodist congregations in the United States left the church. Many departed by means of a paragraph added to the BOD in 2019 specifically for those churches that desired to “disaffiliate” due to principled disagreements with the church’s *potential* stance and practice on matters of sexuality and marriage. That paragraph expired on December 31, 2023. The question before General Conference 2024 is: *Will a new pathway for disaffiliation be created for those churches that may desire to leave after the 2024 (2020) General Conference?* The details of how that pathway would be structured and what it would contain are yet to be determined.

- Centrist-Progressives argue that the legislated period of time for disaffiliation has expired, and that it is now time for the UMC to focus anew on unity in a new “season” for the denomination.
- Traditionalists argue that the time period for disaffiliation ended prematurely, before the issues had been resolved (i.e., as discussed above, to be resolved at the coming GC), that the disaffiliation paragraph did not apply to the international church, and that it would be unjust for African churches and others not to have the opportunity to disaffiliate.

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The table below briefly summarizes the positions of the “Broad Voices” regarding the issues discussed above.

Summary of 2024 General Conference Issues and Voices			
Key Issues / Priorities	Broad Voices		
	<i>Centrist/Progressive</i>	<i>Traditionalist</i>	<i>African Delegation</i>
<i>Regionalization</i>	Regionalize	Stay Connected	Mixed
<i>“Prohibitive Language”</i>	Remove	Retain	Retain
<i>Social Priorities</i>	Rewrite	Retain	Retain
<i>A New Path for Disaffiliation</i>	Against	For	Mixed

V. Prayerful Consideration for the Pender UMC Congregation

It is important that you have your voices heard, your questions answered, and your concerns addressed. Please share questions with Pender leadership and Pastor Bruce by using the cards provided in the session or by sending an email to office.admin@penderumc.org or bruce.j@penderumc.org . Those questions that can be answered now will be summarized and shared with the congregation. Other questions may be more relevant to be considered after the meeting of the General Conference and will be addressed as part of the post-Conference process.

As you pray and reflect on the issues, please consider these questions:

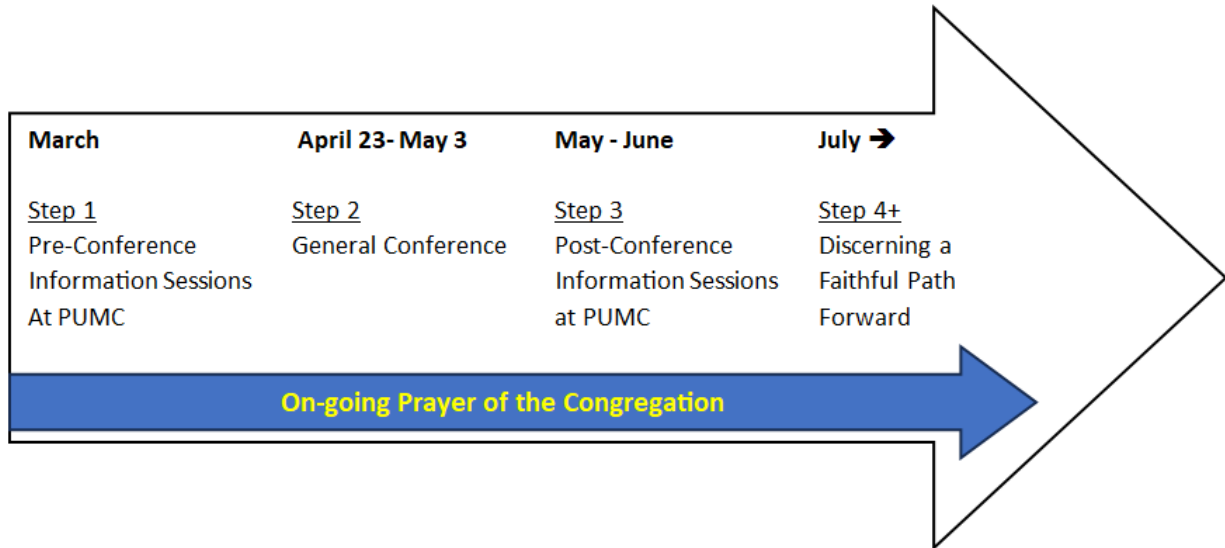
- What are the priorities, concerns and issues for Pender UMC at this point?
 - From among those discussed above
 - Any others
- How will we arrive at a faithful response?

VI. Next Steps for Pender UMC

Below is a timeline that anticipates and captures the key relevant and important next steps for our congregation. The spirit of this dialogue is that any necessary decision-making by Pender UMC will be a process, not an event. As we make this journey together, the leadership of Pender UMC is committed to maintain a spirit of mutual love and respect, Christ-like grace and truth. Our aim follows Paul’s admonition to the Ephesians: “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up in him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body joined

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and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 4:15-16)



VII. Other Resources

Agenda of this year’s conference:

https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2024/01/22/23/57/gc_charlotte_adca_schedule_english_ed.pdf

Official Virginia Conference Website:

www.vaumc.org

Official UM Site for Conference information and News:

<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/general-conference-2020>

<https://www.umnews.org/en/landing-pages/general-conference-news-and-commentary>

Good News, an unofficial traditional caucus within The United Methodist Church:

<https://goodnewsmaq.org/>

Regionalization Legislation

<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/the-connectional-table/regionalization-legislation>

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BOD References:

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (current version as of 2016) is available on-line at: <https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions>.

The specific BOD paragraphs identified in this document are:

¶ 161.C Marriage

We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rest upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

¶ 161.G Human Sexuality

We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.

Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

We deplore all forms of the commercialization, abuse, and exploitation of sex. We call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation of children and for adequate protection, guidance, and counseling for abused children. All persons, regardless of age, gender, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence. The Church should support the family in provide age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults.

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving on another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

¶ 304.3 Qualifications for Ordination

While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with

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Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals¹ are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.²

1. “Self-avowed practicing homosexual” is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, Board of Ordained Ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual; or is living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union, or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual. See Judicial Council Decisions 702, 708, 722, 725, 764, 844, 984, 1020, 1341. (adopted 2019 General Conference)

2. See Judicial Council Decisions 984, 985, 1027, 1028

Part V - SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

Part V of the BOD encompasses paragraphs 160 through 166, and consists of pages 103-145. Due this length (43 pages), the entire Part V is NOT reproduced here (except for ¶166, Our Social Creed); the paragraph headings and major subheadings are presented here to provide an indication of the scope and content of this section that is being proposed to be rewritten (the proposed revision does not use the same outline).

Part V SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

Preface

Preamble

¶ 160 I. THE NATURAL WORLD

¶ 160 .A Water, Air Soil, Minerals, Plants

¶ 160 .B Energy Resources Utilization

¶ 160 .C Animal Life

¶ 160 .D Global Climate Stewardship

¶ 160 .E Space

¶ 160 .F Science and Technology

¶ 160 .G Food Safety

¶ 160 .H Food Justice

¶ 161 II. THE NURTURING COMMUNITY

¶ 161.A Culture and Identity

¶ 161.B The Family

¶ 161.C Marriage

¶ 161.D Divorce

¶ 161.E Single Persons

¶ 161.F Women and Men

¶ 161.G Human Sexuality

¶ 161.H Family Violence and Abuse

¶ 161.I Sexual Abuse

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- ¶ 161.J Sexual Harassment
- ¶ 161.K Abortion
- ¶ 161.L Ministry With Those Who Have Experienced an Abortion
- ¶ 161.M Adoption
- ¶ 161.N Faithful Care for Dying Persons
- ¶ 161.O Suicide
- ¶ 161.P Sexual Assault
- ¶ 161.Q Pornography
- ¶ 161.R Bullying

¶ 162 **III. THE SOCIAL COMMUNITY**

- ¶ 162.A Rights of Racial and Ethnic Persons
- ¶ 162.B Rights of Religious Minorities
- ¶ 162.C Rights of Children
- ¶ 162.D Rights of Young people
- ¶ 162.E Rights of the Aging
- ¶ 162.F Rights of Women
- ¶ 162.G Rights of Men
- ¶ 162.H Rights of Immigrants
- ¶ 162.I Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- ¶ 162.J Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation
- ¶ 162.K Population
- ¶ 162.L Alcohol and Other Drugs
- ¶ 162.M Tobacco
- ¶ 162.N Medical Experimentation
- ¶ 162.O Genetic Technology
- ¶ 162.P Rural Life
- ¶ 162.Q Sustainable Agriculture
- ¶ 162.R Urban-Suburban Life
- ¶ 162.S Media Violence and Christian Values
- ¶ 162.T Information Communication Technology
- ¶ 162.U Persons Living with HIV or AIDS
- ¶ 162.V Right to Health Care
- ¶ 162.W Organ Transplantation and Donation
- ¶ 162.X Mental Health

¶ 163 **IV. THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY**

- ¶ 163.A Property
- ¶ 163.B Collective Bargaining
- ¶ 163.C Work and Leisure
- ¶ 163.D Consumption
- ¶ 163.E Poverty

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- ¶ 163.F Foreign Workers
- ¶ 163.G Gambling
- ¶ 163.H Family Farms
- ¶ 163.I Corporate Responsibility
- ¶ 163.J Finance
- ¶ 163.K Trade and Investment
- ¶ 163.L Graft and Corruption
- ¶ 163.M Public Indebtedness
- ¶ 164 **V. THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY**
- ¶ 164.A Basic Freedoms and Human Rights
- ¶ 164.B Political Responsibility
- ¶ 164.C Church and State Relationships
- ¶ 164.D Freedom of Information
- ¶ 164.E Education
- ¶ 164.F Civil Obedience and Civil Disobedience
- ¶ 164.G The Death Penalty
- ¶ 164.H Criminal and Restorative Justice
- ¶ 164.I Military Service
- ¶ 165 **VI. THE WORLD COMMUNITY**
- ¶ 165.A Nations and Cultures
- ¶ 165.B National Power and Responsibility
- ¶ 165.C War and Peace
- ¶ 165.D Justice and Law

¶ 166 **VII. OUR SOCIAL CREED** (provided *in toto*)

We believe in God, Creator of the world; and in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of creation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God's gifts, and we repent of our sin in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.

We affirm the natural world as God's handiwork and dedicate ourselves to its preservation, enhancement, and faithful use by mankind.

We joyfully receive for ourselves and others the blessings of community, sexuality, marriage, and the family.

We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults, the aging, and people with disabilities; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of all persons.

We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the glory of God and the good of themselves and others and in the protection of their welfare in so doing; in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining, and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress.

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We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.

We believe in the present and final triumph of God's Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world. Amen.

(It is recommended that this statement of Social Principles be continually available to United Methodist Christians and that it be emphasized regularly in every congregation. It is further recommended that "Our Social Creed" is frequently used in Sunday Worship.)