

INTRO

How we United Methodists govern ourselves is part of what makes this denomination unique. We have a special and intentional system for discerning our church's needs and for making decisions. Yet for many, this system can seem puzzling.

Over the next few minutes, we'll unravel part of this puzzle. A key component is General Conference. We'll introduce you to how General Conference works and why it's such an important part of the United Methodist way of doing things.

Let's start with a few simple instructions. You can watch this presentation all the way through from start to finish, or pick any chapter to watch by itself.

As you watch and listen, certain terms will appear highlighted. These are words or phrases that have special meaning to United Methodists, and you can find out more about them in our glossary.

At any time, you can pause the presentation by clicking the pause button.

Let's get started.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

To fully understand General Conference, you need to appreciate a little history. Let's go back:

John Wesley and his brother, Charles, both missionaries in the Church of England, led a renewal movement following transforming religious experiences they each had in 1738. John recognized early on the critical need for a system of communication and mutual accountability within the movement. Small groups, bands, and societies relied on members to understand their responsibilities to the group.

Our structure is a foundation of our strength. We are a "connectional" church – a network of interdependent relationships, acknowledging each other's individual and unique gifts and responsibilities.

Through our connection, United Methodists share a common tradition of faith, a common constitution and leadership of general superintendency, a common mission, and a common ethos that characterizes our distinctive way of doing things. (§1130, BOD).

We have a unified clergy appointment system, a common plan for mission and ministry, and a shared financial responsibility for the support of the church.

THE CONFERENCE SYSTEM

So what does this mean, in practice? To get a handle on that question, let's look quickly at our organizational structure.

First, let's talk about "conferences" – a word you've probably heard before. The denomination's structure is maintained through its chain of conferences. Conferences are both an organization and a meeting of clergy and lay leaders who have responsibility for guiding the work of the church.

Each local church is a connectional society – (there's that word again) of persons who have been baptized, profess their faith in Jesus Christ and assume membership in the

United Methodist Church.

The basic unit of our system is called the charge conference – the organization representing one or more local churches. (§ 246, BOD)

A group of charges or churches is organized into a district. Districts are supervised by a District Superintendent.

An annual conference provides oversight to its districts. The annual conference is the basic body of The United Methodist Church. (§ 368.1) The annual conference is composed of a geographical collection of districts.

There are 63 annual conferences in the United States and 66 outside the U.S. Annual conferences are important to this discussion, because among other things, they elect delegates to General and Jurisdictional conferences, as well as examine and recommend candidates for ministry.

Bishops serve as general superintendents for the entire denomination, but each Bishop also presides over a specific geographic area.

Here's where it gets a bit tricky. A Bishop presides within the bounds of what's called an Episcopal Area. An Episcopal Area is usually – but not always – the same as an Annual Conference, but some bishops preside over more than one Annual Conference. A bishop's regional area of responsibility, regardless of the number of Annual Conferences, is always called an Episcopal Area.

The jurisdictional conferences – comprised of a geographic collection of annual conferences – are responsible for setting the boundaries of the annual conferences and for electing Bishops for those annual conferences. There are five jurisdictions within the continental United States – Northeast, Southeast, North Central, South Central and Western.

Central conferences are located outside the United States and have a different structure than the annual conferences in the United States. They are structured more like the United States' jurisdictional conferences. There are seven Central Conferences: Africa, Central and Southern Europe, Congo, Germany, Northern Europe, Philippines and West Africa. Each is comprised of a geographic collection of annual conferences.

GENERAL CONFERENCE, AN OVERVIEW

Finally! We arrive at the General Conference.

Remember that we said General Conference is comprised of delegates elected from the Annual and Central Conferences? These conferences elect an equal number of lay and clergy members to represent them at General Conference.

Lay members vote for lay delegates and clergy vote for clergy delegates. The number of delegates from each conference is based on the number of clergy members and the number of lay members in that conference.

General Conference convenes once every four years and lasts between eight and ten days. Nearly 1,000 delegates gather to set the direction for the denomination for the next four years – the quadrennium.

The delegates to General Conference have authority over all matters that are distinctly

connectional – such as setting policy regarding church membership, ordination, administration, property and judicial procedures. And General Conference is the only group that can speak on behalf of the entire denomination.

Delegates vote on petitions and resolutions that modify, delete or add to the *Book of Discipline* and the *Book of Resolutions*. The *Book of Discipline* describes how local churches, districts, annual conference and the general agencies are organized. It also sets policy regarding church membership, ordination, administration, property and judicial procedures.

The *Book of Resolutions* declares the church's position on a wide range of social issues and sets the guidelines as to how our faith can be lived out in the world.

Delegates also vote on the budget for general church – which in terms affects the financial offerings – or apportionment – that annual conferences are asked to provide to the general church.

Besides the delegates, there are others who also play important roles at General Conference.

All Bishops, active and retired, attend General Conference. Bishops are not voting members and have no voice without permission of the body. However, a bishop presides as the chair of each General Conference session. Every time the full body – called the plenary – meets, a different bishop presides over the meeting.

All members of the General Council on Finance and Administration attend General Conference. Known as GCFA, this agency helps set the budget for general church initiatives, and monitors the financial health of the general agencies, as well as the church as a whole.

The chief executive officers – the general secretaries of the 13 general church agencies also attend. They do not vote and cannot speak without permission of the body.

BEING A DELEGATE

Now what about you, the delegate?

To be a lay delegate, you must be a professing member of The United Methodist Church for at least two years and an active participant in the United Methodist Church for at least four years preceding election.

You must also be a member of the annual conference that elected you. In other words, you've represented your local church at the most recent annual conference session. Delegates vote on critical issues that will impact the future of our church, so you need to be well informed. You'll wrestle with today's issues in light of scriptural teachings and the church's understanding of those teachings.

There are volumes of legislation, letters, and brochures to read before – and during – General Conference. Check with your annual conference office to see what assistance they may be able to provide you. Annual conferences hold pre-General Conference meetings to help inform and prepare delegates and we encourage you to take advantage of all opportunities to familiarize yourself with the issues and be prepared for the serious work ahead. The General Conference website provides tons of background information – visit it frequently in the months leading up to the meeting.

Another part of your responsibility will be to understand and evaluate all sides of the many competing ideas you'll be presented with. Our church is global and as a result is wonderfully diverse. Our diversity of thought can generate conflict over how we should go about doing our work.

Conflicts at General Conference are inevitable. Spend time each day during General Conference reminding yourself that we are all uniquely created and diverse, and that disagreement can provide an opportunity to grow. Both sides of a conflict can be right and both can be wrong. Remember always that God invites us to dialogue, and that God's power can heal and recreate.

Besides preparing intellectually, spiritual preparation is also crucial. The conference can be a draining time, a time for spiritual stress, so make sure that you find time to be in prayer and meditation both before and during.

It's critical that you remember that you're not only representing your annual conference, but also your local church. You're not just representing yourself.

DAY IN THE LIFE OF A DELEGATE

Expect your days – and nights – to be busy. Each day begins with worship around 8:30, but for many, the day begins even earlier with breakfast planning meetings or devotional time.

You will be away from home for almost two weeks – so your time away needs to be arranged. You'll incur expenses, and not all annual conferences reimburse delegates for all expenses. So, plan ahead and make sure you understand what's covered and what's not.

As a rule, during the first week the entire body gathers in the morning for worship and then adjourns for committee meetings in the afternoon and evening. During the second week, the body is in plenary all day, and into the evening, with breaks that seems oh-so-short, for lunch and dinner.

But don't think you're all alone as a delegate. All delegates from your Annual Conference work together as a delegation. On the floor of the General Conference – during plenary sessions – all delegates from your Conference sit together. Delegations typically meet together once a day outside of the scheduled meetings. Use this as a time for spiritual renewal.

While much of the focus of General Conference is on organizing, planning and funding the ministries of the church, General Conference is not solely a legislative gathering. It's also a time for celebration and reflection. Morning worship is particularly meaningful, not only because of the special care given to its planning, but because each day features a local church choir. Some of these choirs have literally traveled halfway around the world to be at General Conference. It's a special time.

General Conference is a time for networking, ad-hoc gatherings and an opportunity to learn about the multitude of church ministries.

UNDERSTANDING THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The legislative process will seem complex for a first-time delegate. In a nutshell, here's how it works:

In the months leading up to General Conference, petitions are sent to the Secretary of General Conference. Church agencies, conferences, churches, advocacy groups and individual members can all submit petitions. We're the only denomination that allows individuals to petition their legislative assembly.

These petitions are assigned to one of 13 legislative committees that are tasked with reviewing all proposed legislation. At the last general conference over 1,600 petitions were assigned to committees.

Prior to the conference, you'll receive a copy of the Advance Edition of the Daily Christian Advocate, a publication with the names of delegates and legislative committee assignments, reports from general agencies and the text of the petitions. The publication is printed in English, Portuguese and French.

Each delegate serves on a committee. You'll spend most of the first week in committee, considering the petitions. Committees vote to concur, amend or not concur with the petition. This recommendation is sent to the entire body – the plenary – and is now called calendar items.

Depending on the item, there may be oral reports to pay attention to and written committee reports to read. Speeches from the floor – both for and against a particular calendar item – are a common occurrence and deserve your attention.

Plenary sessions are translated – in real time – into German, French, Portuguese, Swahili, Spanish, Russian and Korean. Delegates and visitors who speak these languages can easily keep up with the proceedings.

After all the reports, debate and discussion, delegates vote to concur or not concur with the committee's recommendation. Fortunately, nowadays voting is done electronically. It wasn't too many years ago when all votes were counted by hand!

Each day during the conference, you'll receive a copy of the Daily Christian Advocate with news, features, committee's reports and a verbatim report of preceding plenary sessions. Most importantly, the DCA has the schedule of calendar items that will be considered by the plenary that day.

This daily publication lets delegates know which proposals are being debated and the actions taken on previous days. By the end of the nine-day session, delegates will have received more than 2,500 DCA pages.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

After your two-week duty at General Conference, you perform one more very important role – you're a delegate to your Jurisdictional Conference.

Jurisdictional Conferences are held right after General Conference. These conferences promote evangelism, education, missions and benevolence in The United Methodist Church; you elect bishops and plan for their support to select members of the general boards and agencies; and determine the boundaries of annual conferences.

This is the place where decisions are made to merge conferences and decide who shall represent the jurisdiction on the various boards and agencies of The United Methodist Church.

Since bishops are the top spiritual leaders in the United Methodist Church, it's important to choose them wisely. They should represent the whole church in social concerns, race, ethnicity and gender. The candidates are nominated by their respective annual conferences.

WRAPPING UP

As you can see, as a delegate you're making a serious and substantial commitment for yourself personally, and for the church.

General Conference is an important event in the life of The United Methodist Church. It connects people from all across the church and is a time of celebration for who we are as United Methodists.

For more information about General Conference, visit GC2008.UMC.ORG.