

One Church Plan (7/19/2018 Summary)

“The One Church Plan gives churches the room they need to maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible,” says the opening statement on a report on the work of the Commission on a Way Forward.

The report said the plan honors the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church and that no annual conferences, bishops, congregations or pastors are “compelled to act contrary to their convictions.”

Key issues of the legislation include eliminating the Book of Discipline language, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Also deleted is the requirement that ordained clergy not be “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” Each annual conference board of ordained ministry and clergy session may determine standards for ordination or certification, including standards related to human sexuality.

Where laws in civil society define marriage as union between two adults, no United Methodist elder or deacon is required to celebrate or bless a same-sex union. But a clergy person cannot be prohibited from performing same-sex marriages, unions or blessings.

Clergy who cannot in good conscience continue to serve in a conference or church based on the standards for ordination regarding homosexuals may seek to transfer. All clergy with security of appointment shall continue under appointment by the bishop of the annual conference.

Local church members can decide what is best for their congregational and missional context related to same-sex marriage on church property. Local churches must vote — in a church conference open to all members — to allow their property to be used for a same-sex ceremony. These changes apply only to the jurisdictional conferences in the U.S., according to the report from the Commission on a Way Forward.

“Central conferences, through the work of the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, will have the authority to retain the present language regarding chargeable offenses of clergy and questions of ordination related to homosexuality found in the Book of Discipline (2016) or adopt working in these paragraphs that best serves their missional contexts.”

The One Church Plan ends the threat of church trials over same-gender weddings. Local churches already have the authority to establish wedding policies, and pastors already discern whom they will or will not marry.

The Way Forward report also asks the General Council of Finance and Administration to find means consistent with the Book of Discipline to ensure each jurisdictional conference or area supports the costs of its own episcopal leader and office.

Under the heading “Theological and Biblical Foundations,” the report said the One Church Plan offers more space for both traditionalists and progressives.

“United Methodists in central conferences want space to shape conversations about sexuality according to their national context and without replicating whatever practices shape churches in the United States.

“Other United Methodists want to give space as generously as possible without compromising core identity and mission.”

The One Church Plan honors United Methodist who believe that the denomination’s impasse over marriage and ordination of homosexual individuals “does not rise to the level of a church dividing.”

The report spells out the effects of the One Church Plan on each segment of The United Methodist Church.

“This plan minimizes disruption in the local church (in most cases) and gives freedom to churches to adapt in order to minister to the LGBTQ community in their context. It allows for independence as well as interdependence and creates a contextual church for the next generation.”

The plan allows clergy to remain or leave the church because of a change in language of the Book of Discipline. Their vested pension will be protected at the time of their departure. It also allows clergy to transfer to another annual conference.

According to the commission, no amendments will need to be made to the constitution. If passed at the 2019 General Conference, the One Church Plan could take effect on Jan. 1, 2020. However it is recommended that the church take until Dec. 31, 2020, to fully implement the plan to give everyone time to acclimate.

All three plans contain provisions for handling pension funds, but the One Church and Connectional plans contain no provisions for churches that want to change their relationship with The United Methodist Church. According to the Way Forward report, the Council of Bishops indicated that there were already provisions in place for a church that might want to leave. “The language of ‘exit’ should be used carefully so as not to encourage people to look for an ‘exit’ but rather to help The United Methodist Church focus on unity,” the Council of Bishops said in the Way Forward report.

The Traditional Plan does include provisions for self-governing churches and annual conferences as well as dealing with church property.