

## **An Introduction to A Way Forward**

by Kerry Bart. March 2017

[www.FirstChurchBville.com/a-way-forward.html](http://www.FirstChurchBville.com/a-way-forward.html)

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AT THE WORLD-WIDE MEETING of the leadership (bishops and elected clergy and laity delegates) of The United Methodist Church, which was held in Seattle in May 2016, a new thing happened: the General Conference asked the Council of Bishops to create a Commission for the purpose of examining possible "futures" for The United Methodist Church.

The request for such a Commission comes after years of increasing tension and division among United Methodists, most often having to do with issues of human sexuality, biblical interpretation, and the clergy covenant. How shall the Church respond to increasing social acceptance of homosexuality, and marriage equality? Shall the Church ordain "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals"? What shall the Church do about clergy who celebrate same-sex marriages (which is against our Church rules)? How shall the Church deal with theological differences in interpreting some specific Bible passages? Is the division in the Church irreconcilable? Is a split inevitable? What might such a split look like?

Thirty-two women and men were invited by the Council of Bishops to be The Commission on a Way Forward, with three bishops as moderators. The Commission shall meet and make recommendations to the General Conference at some point between now and 2020.

Pastor Kerry has prepared some informational pages here, and invites your questions. And requests your prayers. Please visit the website [umcprays.org](http://umcprays.org)

The background: [tinyurl.com/CommissionPartOne](http://tinyurl.com/CommissionPartOne) (see pages 2-4 of this document)

The "Way Forward" that initiated the formation of the Commission:  
<http://wordsfrompk.blogspot.com/2017/03/an-offering-for-way-forward.html>  
(see page 5-6 of this document)

The Commission membership: <http://www.firstchurchbville.com/the-commission.html>  
(see pages 7-8 of this document)

Some questions and answers, updated March 2017: [tinyurl.com/CommissionPartTwo](http://tinyurl.com/CommissionPartTwo)  
(see page 9-12 of this document)

## Part One: On The United Methodist Church and the Bishops' Commission on a Way Forward: the Background

*On Saturday March 4, 2017, Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball of the West Virginia Area Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church addressed a group of laity and clergy at Forrest Burdette UMC in Hurricane, WV. After a service of word and sacrament led by Midland South District Superintendent Frank Shomo, Bishop Steiner Ball shared with the gathering a progress update regarding the Council of Bishops' Commission on a Way Forward.*

*This posting is a work of the Reverend Kerry Bart, pastor, First United Methodist Church, Barboursville, WV.*

THERE IS ONE BODY ONLY that speaks for The United Methodist Church, and it is the General Conference. Not the laity, not the clergy, not even the bishops, but only the General Conference. We were reminded several times by Bishop Steiner Ball that church groups, special interest groups, and the media may each make *claims* like “this is what is happening in The UMC” but the most accurate (and only official) information about The UMC is published in the 2016 Book of Discipline and the 2016 Book of Resolutions. As such, it is important when hearing or writing or discussing current events and The United Methodist Church to consider the source and what has been emphasized in this paragraph.

The General Conference is the worldwide gathering of United Methodist bishops and elected clergy and laity delegates that convenes every four years to shape church polity and mission.

At General Conference in May 2016, in response to a number of proposals related to The UMC and issues of human sexuality as well as biblical interpretation and clergy integrity, the General Conference requested that the Council of Bishops form a commission to help lead our United Methodist Church forward during this time of both great crisis and great opportunity.

The bishops responded with “An Offering for a Way Forward,” (see page 5 of this document) which is the subject of this document. The Offering for a Way Forward concluded with the statement, “We will continue to explore options to help the church live in grace and with one another — including ways to avoid further complaints, trials and harm while we uphold the Discipline. We will continue our conversation on this matter and report our progress to you and to the whole church.”

The bishops' Offering for a Way Forward was approved by General Conference, and the Council of Bishops formed a Commission on a Way Forward (hereafter the Commission). The Commission has 32 members and three moderators. Commission membership includes eight bishops, eleven elders, two deacons, and eleven laity; 21 persons from the USA, seven from Africa, two from Europe, and two from the

Philippines. There are nineteen men and fourteen women on the commission. Bishops Sandra Steiner Ball, Kenneth Carter (both USA), and David Yemba (Africa) are the moderators. (See pages 6-7 of this document to read more about the Commission's membership). The Commission will meet something like nine times face-to-face in 2017 (don't quote me on that yet) in order to pray and study and discuss positions and ultimately present its labors to the General Conference.

One possible outcome of this Way Forward would be that a special General Conference be convened perhaps in 2019 for the sole purpose of presenting the Commission's recommendation to General Conference.

I feel it is worth noting that the Council of Bishops' Offering for a Way Forward is not associated with proposals offered by the Reverends Adam Hamilton and Mike Slaughter that also bore the name "A Way Forward."

The three paragraphs on page 4 of this document describe the Commission's mission and vision and scope. These three paragraphs are the Commission's, not mine.

## **The Mission, Vision, Scope of the Council of Bishops' Commission on a Way Forward**

### **Mission**

The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions. We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God, and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view. We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained; yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration. The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.

### **Vision**

The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.

### **Scope**

We should be open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality. Therefore, we should consider new ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions, in understandings of episcopacy, in contextual definitions of autonomy for annual conferences, and in the design and purpose of the apportionment. In reflection on the two matters of unity and human sexuality, we will fulfill our directive by considering “new forms and structures” of relationship and through the “complete examination and possible revision” of relevant paragraphs in the Book of Discipline. We will give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present connectionality, which is showing signs of brokenness. If we ignore this work, fracturing will occur in more haphazard and even self-interested ways across the church. If we do this work only to address our preferences and self-interest, we will fail to place our complete trust in God's steadfast love and faithfulness. If we do this work with complete surrender to God's unlimited imagination and kingdom purposes, we will be blessed beyond our limited human imagination. God remains God; God is with us; God will never let us go. To God be the glory!

(end Commission quotation)

## **An Offering for a Way Forward**

With the exception of this introductory paragraph, pages 5 and 6 are in their entirety the "Offering for a Way Forward" that the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church extended to the General Conference of The United Methodist Church in May 2016. General Conference approved this offering, and a Commission on a Way Forward was created.

### **An Offering For A Way Forward**

Galatians 3:25-29 (NRSV)

*<sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

Your bishops were honored to receive the request of General Conference to help lead our United Methodist Church forward during this time of both great crisis and great opportunity. As far as we can discover, this is the first time that a General Conference has ever made such a request of the Council of Bishops, and we accept this request with humility.

We share with you a deep commitment to the unity of the church in Christ our Lord. Yesterday, our president [Bishop Bruce R. Ough] shared the deep pain we feel. We have all prayed for months and continue to do so. We seek, in this kairos moment, a way forward for profound unity on human sexuality and other matters. This deep unity allows for a variety of expression to co-exist in one church. Within the Church, we are called to work and pray for more Christ-like unity with each other rather than separation from one another. This is the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21-23.

**UNITY** We believe that our unity is found in Jesus Christ; it is not something we achieve but something we receive as a gift from God. We understand that part of our role as bishops is to lead the church toward new behaviors, a new way of being and new forms and structures which allow a unity of our mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" while allowing for differing expressions as a global church. Developing such new forms will require a concerted effort by all of us, and we your bishops commit ourselves to lead this effort. We ask you, as a General Conference, to affirm your own commitment to maintaining and strengthening the unity of the church. We will coordinate this work with the various efforts already underway to develop global structures and a new *General Book of Discipline* for our church. Strengthening the unity of the church is a responsibility for all of us.

**PRAYER** We accept our role as spiritual leaders to lead the UMC in a "pause for prayer" - to step back from attempts at legislative solutions and to intentionally seek God's will for the future. As a Council of Bishops, we will lead the church in every part of the world in times of worship, study, discernment, confession and prayer for God's guidance. We ask you, as a General Conference, to join us in this effort, beginning this week [May 10-20, 2016]. We were moved by the sight of delegates praying around the table, and we hope these efforts will continue. As your bishops we are ready to join you and to lead you in these times of prayer.

**PROCESSES** We have discussed in depth the processes which might help our church heal and move forward - up to and including the possibility of a called General Conference in 2018 or 2019. We have not finalized our plans for such processes, but we will keep working on options we have heard from many of you, and we will keep reporting to this General Conference and to the whole church.

**NEXT STEPS** We recommend that the General Conference defer all votes on human sexuality and refer this entire subject to a special Commission, named by the Council of Bishops, to develop a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph in our *Book of Discipline* regarding human sexuality. We continue to hear from many people on the debate over sexuality that our current *Discipline* contains language which is contradictory, unnecessarily hurtful, and inadequate for the variety of local, regional and global contexts. We will name such a Commission to include persons from every region of our UMC, and will include representation from differing perspectives on the debate. We commit to maintain an on-going dialogue with this Commission as they do their work, including clear objectives and outcomes. Should they complete their work in time for a called General Conference, then we will call a two- to three-day gathering before the 2020 General Conference. (We will consult with GCFA regarding cost-effective ways to hold that gathering.)

**CONTINUING DISCUSSIONS** We will continue to explore options to help the church live in grace with one another - including ways to avoid further complaints, trials and harm while we uphold the *Discipline*. We will continue our conversation on this matter and report our progress to you and to the whole church.

***Today, as a way of beginning to find our way forward, we suggest that in place of the allotted legislative time we spend 1-2 hours of plenary time in prayer, confession and exploration of a creative way forward. The bishops are prepared to provide questions to guide your conversations. Your conversations will be the first step to a way forward.***

(end Offering quotation)

United Methodist Communications  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Washington, D.C.

Office of Public Information  
October 24, 2016

The United Methodist Council of Bishops has announced the membership of the Commission on a Way Forward.

"After three months of diligent and prayerful discernment, we have selected 8 bishops, 11 laity, 11 elders and 2 deacons to serve on the Commission," said Bishop Bruce R. Ough, president of the Council of Bishops. "This group is representative of our theological diversity."

Ough said the makeup of the 32-member commission is roughly comparable to U.S. and Central Conference membership.

All of the members of the Commission have already indicated their willingness and availability to serve. The team of moderators – Bishop Ken Carter, Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball and Bishop David Yemba – will soon convene the Commission to begin to organize their work and finalize their meeting schedule.

The Commission's mission is to "bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions."

The 2016 General Conference gave a specific mandate to the Council of Bishops to lead The United Methodist Church in discerning and proposing a way forward through the present impasse related to human sexuality and the consequent questions about unity and covenant.

The Commission is a group appointed by the Council of Bishops to assist the Council in fulfilling this mandate. As such, the Council has appointed bishops from across the global connection to serve on the Commission alongside laity and clergy. While clergy and laity will vote at a General Conference on these matters, the bishops have the responsibility to lead the church. Thus, the Commission is designed to inform the Council's leadership of the General Conference. After hearing concerns that the proposed composition did not include enough laity, three additional laypersons were added from the original pool of more than 300 nominees.

At their fall meeting (October 30 – November 2), the Council will make a decision about a called General Conference and will review a plan to conduct additional and complementary work in annual conferences designed to broaden the conversation with hundreds of lay and clergy members.

The members of the Commission are:

**Jorge Acevedo**

USA, Florida, elder, male

**Brian Adkins**

USA, California, elder, male

**Jacques Umembudi Akasa**

Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, laity, male

**Tom Berlin**

USA, Virginia, elder, male

**Matt Berryman**

USA, Illinois, laity, male

**Helen Cunanan**

Philippines, elder, female

**David Field**

Europe, Switzerland, laity, male

**Ciriaco Francisco**

Philippines, bishop, male

**Grant Hagiya**

USA, California, bishop, male

**Aka Dago-Akribi Hortense**

Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, laity, female

**Scott Johnson**

USA, New York, laity, male

**Jessica LaGrone**

USA, Kentucky, elder, female

**Thomas Lambrecht**

USA, Texas, elder, male

**MyungRae Kim Lee**

USA, New York, laity, female

**Julie Hager Love**

USA, Kentucky, deacon, female

**Mazvita Machinga**

Africa, Zimbabwe, laity, female

**Patricia Miller**

USA, Indiana, laity, female

**Mande Guy Muyombo**

Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, elder, male

**Eben Nhiwatiwa**

Africa, Zimbabwe, bishop, male

**Dave Nuckols**

USA, Minnesota, laity, male

**Casey Langley Orr**

USA, Texas, deacon, female

**Gregory Palmer**

USA, Ohio, bishop, male

**Donna Pritchard**

USA, Oregon, elder, female

**Tom Salsgiver**

USA, Pennsylvania, elder, male

**Robert Schnase**

USA, Texas, bishop, male

**Jasmine Rose Smothers**

USA, Georgia, elder, female

**Leah Taylor**

USA, Texas, laity, female

**Debra Wallace-Padgett**

USA, Alabama, bishop, female

**Rosemarie Wenner**

Europe, Germany, bishop, female

**Alice Williams**

USA, Florida, laity, female

**John Wesley Yohanna**

Africa, Nigeria, bishop, male

**Alfiado S. Zunguza**

Africa, Mozambique, elder, male

**MODERATORS**

**Sandra Steiner Ball**

USA, West Virginia, bishop, female

**Kenneth Carter**

USA, Florida, bishop, male

**David Yemba**

Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, bishop, male

(end *Membership* quotation)

## Part Two: On The United Methodist Church and the Bishops' Commission on a Way Forward: progress update 3/2017

Pages 9-12 of this document contain a few brief notes about a progress report on the Commission, and some Q&A, as well as a resource or two.

The background:

*On Saturday March 4, 2017, Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball of the West Virginia Area Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church addressed a group of laity and clergy at Forrest Burdette UMC in Hurricane, WV. After a service of word and sacrament led by Midland South District Superintendent Frank Shomo, Bishop Steiner Ball shared with the gathering a progress update regarding the Council of Bishops' Commission on a Way Forward. This document is a work of the Reverend Kerry Bart, Barboursville First United Methodist Church.*

Now, my personal review of Bishop Steiner Ball's presentation.

I found the presentation to be very thorough and even-keeled. There is a lot of background to cover (as evidenced by the background post's 1,000 words!) and I scribbled down a few questions while the bishop was talking. Most of the questions she answered even without me asking them.

Bishop Steiner Ball spoke about the Commission's desire to keep the main thing the main thing, reiterating **The UMC's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world**. This is central and vital.

By my reckoning, there are 3 areas of focus that the Commission will have to address:

- issues of human sexuality and The UMC,
- issues surrounding biblical interpretation,
- the clergy covenant / ecclesial disobedience.

The Commission is *not* about making others change their minds.

Going back to the stated vision of the Commission (parsed by me, quoted on page 4):

*the Commission will design a way for being church...  
in as many places in the world as possible,  
that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible,  
and that balances an approach to different theological  
understandings of human sexuality  
with a desire for as much unity as possible...  
grounded in... our affirmation of the Triune God  
who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people  
in the Wesleyan tradition.*

For ease of access, I'm going to proceed in a Q/A fashion now.

Some of my answers are still works in progress. Please email me if you have questions about my presentation. kerrfunk1@gmail.com.

Q: Who is in the Commission?

Q: How are these discussions happening?

Q: What are the discussions covering?

Q: Will there be a special General Conference before GC2020?

Q: What about the election of Bishop Karen Oliveto?

Q: Is The UMC going to split?

Q: What can I do?

Q: How can I contact the Commission?

Q: Who is in the Commission? Only bishops? All of the bishops?

A: A membership roster was handed out (page 8) and I provided some demographics about the roster (bottom of page 2). Members were invited by the Council of Bishops, accounting for a range of perspectives and including clergy and laity, men and women, and global representation.

Q: How are these discussions happening?

A: The Commission, formed in October 2016 will have nine face-to-face meetings, gathering approximately every six weeks, and sharing many resources with each other online as well. As of March 2017, the Commission has had two meetings.

Q: What are the discussions covering?

A: The Commission will examine every passage in the Discipline relevant to human sexuality and may suggest revisions, replacements, or deletions.

Relevant paragraphs (numbered from the Book of Discipline 2012 but identical in content in BOD2016) include

- ¶341.6 and ¶2702.1 (prohibiting homosexual unions),
- ¶613.19 and ¶806.9 (prohibiting Church funding for or against homosexuality),
- ¶304.3 (on ordination requirements in The UMC),
- ¶161.B (definition of marriage),
- ¶161.F (on human sexuality. Includes "sacred worth" as well as "incompatible"),
- and ¶335.C.4 (UMC ministers shall be in ministry to all persons).

In addition to the BOD and the Book of Resolutions, the Commission is considering and studying commentaries on many scripture passages, and the works of John and Charles Wesley, as well.

The Commission has spent two meetings behind closed doors in honest and heartfelt conversation, and there are many resources being read and shared. Bishop Steiner Ball indicated that members are reporting personal transformation as a result of their work and presence in the Commission, and the work and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Commission is grounded in prayer and scripture and sacrament. They recommend group studies of Paul's letter to the Galatians, as well the book *The Anatomy of Peace* (this book is available on Amazon.com). The Commission is also receiving counsel and guidance from author and consultant, Rev. Gil Rendel.

Q: Will there be a special General Conference before GC2020?

A: Maybe. Perhaps in 2019. By our Discipline, a special General Conference must be announced [something like 220 days] before it takes place, and the agenda [must be set ahead of time, and limited in scope – that is, a special GC would essentially have one topic]. With nine Commission gatherings and the clock ticking, there's not a lot of time to set a special General Conference.

Related: A special GC would operate practically as a sort of extension of GC2016, that is, it would operate under the rules passed at GC2016, rules which were debated for three days at the beginning of GC2016. If rules were debated at a special GC2019 for that long, there'd be no time to attend to the matter at hand!

Q: What about the election of Bishop Karen Oliveto, an openly gay woman, in the Western Jurisdiction?

A: Ultimately, that is not in the scope of the Commission, but belongs instead to the Judicial Council of The UMC.

Q: Is The UMC going to split?

A: Nobody knows. The only way to answer this question with a "yes" would be after a General Conference has agreed on a split. That did not happen in 2016, and it cannot happen without a General Conference agreeing on it. This Commission will make its recommendations either to a special GC or to GC2020.

Q: What can I do?

A: Lots.

**Pray** for the members of the Commission (and check out the website [UMCPrays.org](http://UMCPrays.org). There's a schedule where every Annual Conference has a focus week of prayer for the Commission, and there are other resources as well).

**Study:** engage in personal and group studies of Galatians and The Anatomy of Peace. Help spread good information, and help stamp out bad information.

Fast.

Exercise patience.

Q: How can I contact the Commission?

A: Contact the Commission by emailing [wayforward@umcom.org](mailto:wayforward@umcom.org).

Contact me by emailing [kerrfunk1@gmail.com](mailto:kerrfunk1@gmail.com).