

**Report of the Technology Study Team
to the Commission on the General Conference
The United Methodist Church**

Executive Summary

The Technology Study Team makes the following recommendation:

Distribute to each General Conference delegate a mail ballot consisting of “Emergency Interim Actions,” on which the General Conference delegates would indicate a YES or NO vote for each item. “Emergency Interim Actions” would be the fewest number of proposed actions necessary for the church to function until an “in person” gathering of General Conference delegates could be safely convened in accordance with public health and travel requirements.

Introduction

In October 2020, the Commission on the General Conference named a Technology Study Team (TST) to explore the implications of options for accommodating full participation at General Conference including, but not limited to, the possibility of utilizing technology and online voting. The study team considered a number of challenges and implications, including how to keep participants safe, providing for global participation, safeguarding the integrity of the voting and credentialing process, and meeting legal requirements—all while acknowledging that much remains and will continue to remain unknown.

Procedure

The TST began by identifying essential questions or necessary information that would guide research about the viability of an electronic gathering of the General Conference. The TST divided into three sub-groups and assigned questions to each one. The sub-groups were:

- Rules Research Group
- Credentials, Integrity, and Security Research Group
- Schedule and Agenda Research Group

The study team was aided by an Advisory Panel of volunteer staff and contractors who worked alongside the study team to provide practical reflection and suggestions on possible implementation of the ideas discussed. This panel also consulted with a variety of individuals and groups across the UMC connection, including field staff with United Methodist Communications who provided valuable insight into infrastructure and pandemic conditions outside the United States.

Each of the sub-groups met several times virtually during the month of January and reported weekly to the full TST from January 15 through January 29. On January 29, the TST received final reports from all sub-groups and finalized the report for the Commission on the General Conference.

Other Models Considered

The Technology Study Team explored a variety of in-person and electronic options, including:

- an entirely electronic General Conference, with each individual participating virtually from their home or alternate location;
- an entirely electronic General Conference, with delegates gathering at regional satellite hubs;
- two sessions (Part A and Part B), with Part A being electronic and Part B in-person when it is safe to convene.

Delegates at Individual Locations (Homes)

The TST quickly realized that gathering electronically by videoconference, with each delegate on an individual internet connection, was not feasible. There were significant concerns about the ability to provide accurate credentialing and verification of identity using this model, as well as difficulties in utilizing reserve delegates. There were also significant concerns about equity of global connection and participation. Consultation with UMC agency staff outside the United States showed that access to electricity and internet is not reliable in all areas where The UMC has a strong presence. Many individuals would have to travel to internet cafes, which are expensive and often require substantial travel to access. Internet speeds would often not allow adequate participation by videoconference, with frequent lags and disruptions of the connection which could also affect voting. Providing support to individual delegates in the event of a disrupted connection, malfunctioning device, or other needed assistance would be difficult if not impossible. All of this is compounded by the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to cause lockdowns and restrictions on travel and gathering.

This option was determined not to be possible due to great difficulty and investment of resources in areas where the basic infrastructure very well does not exist, does not function reliably, or is under the control of governments which have used the infrastructure itself as a tool of influence and control.

Two-Part General Conference Utilizing Regional Hubs

The TST thoroughly investigated a scenario in which a single General Conference session would hold two separate meetings (Part A and Part B), with delegates gathering at regional satellite hubs for Part A and gathering in-person for Part B at a later date.

- Part A would be a shortened meeting of General Conference, with delegates gathering at 6-10 regional satellite locations. Video and audio operations would be centralized at a single location which would also house conference leadership. Throughout consultations with the Advisory Panel and others throughout the UMC connection, it became clear that 6-10 such locations is the largest feasible number. More such

locations, such as annual conferences, would require more set-up, staff and technology support, and more connections to manage all at once.

- Part B would follow a recess of several months and would be held when the Commission on the General Conference had determined a safe and healthy gathering of all delegates could be accomplished in accordance with public health and travel requirements of the international bodies involved.
- With fourteen legislative committees, it is only feasible logistically to have the committees function during the in-person (Part B) meeting. A key advantage of 6-10 regional locations for Part A is that it limits the number of electronic feeds that must be coordinated. All legislative committees meeting concurrently would multiply the number of feeds beyond what is manageable. While legislative committees could meet on separate days during Part A, this would extend the overall time for that portion. Moreover, some committees would need to be reconvened if the Committee on Reference assigned petitions throughout the legislative committee process to different committees.

For Part A, particular attention was given to accommodating multiple time zones and scheduling meals, breaks, and conference business. The length of each day would be a maximum of four hours per day. The delegates from the United States would gather if possible in an eastern time zone location to lessen the time differences with other regions. In this scenario, additional time would have to be allotted in the agenda to allow for increased voting time. Annual conferences that met electronically generally experienced a lag time in voting. Short breaks were discussed with COVID protocols in place. Delegates would be encouraged to take restroom and other personal breaks as needed throughout the session to avoid all delegates congregating in a single area.

Another consideration for a Part A meeting is the need to have continuous back-channel communication between the satellite locations to the main hub. The communication would help guide the presiding officer on when the ballot process is finished in each location, knowing if there are any technology glitches in various locations, determining whether it is necessary to switch to a different tool for communication, and similar concerns.

For a Part A meeting, each delegate's housing, meals, and travel would be provided rather than given on a per-diem basis. Single occupancy housing would be used if needed to meet COVID safety protocols. Monitoring from GCORR and COSROW could rely on world-wide contacts from these agencies to be present at all of the satellite locations, again using back-channel communications as needed.

Unfeasibility of Regional Hubs

After reviewing this scenario in depth and consulting with the Advisory Panel and a number of other entities, including field staff with United Methodist Communications at locations outside the United States and other UMC agency staff, the TST determined that the two-part General Conference, using regional satellite hubs to gather electronically for Part A, is not feasible for a number of reasons. These include:

1. Operations

- **Technology:** There is not technology which would allow for equitable Holy Conferencing worldwide; in any scenario, some sites would have easier and more reliable access than others. Technology which does exist requires the event to be heavily scripted, following a prescribed format and keeping to that set agenda. This is not typical for all of General Conference and it would not facilitate Holy Conferencing.
- **Legislative Committees:** There is no technical function which would allow for the pre-planning functions and legislative committees to convene, due to complexity of referrals to a committee which would have already met.
- **Reimbursement:** To reimburse attendees worldwide, collaborative work and training would need to occur with annual conference treasurers, the General Board of Global Ministries, and the Treasurer and Business Manager of the General Conference. It would require extra expenses related to financial staff at each hub. Arrangements with local banks would be necessary, as well as minimal expense for bank wire transfer fees.

2. Access

- **Electricity:** Electricity is not reliably available worldwide at all locations where churches and conferences exist. Individuals at some locations reported unpredictable loss of electricity or electricity only for certain time periods during the day.
- **Internet:** Connection is not available 24/7 in all countries, and in many areas it is not available at all. Lockdowns and curfews could further restrict access during evening hours. Furthermore, individuals would need to travel to locate it for participation, and with travel restrictions, it is not possible.
- **Travel:** The travel industry has been hit hard by the pandemic. Airline flight times and options are varied based on the decrease in passengers. Some countries have put travel restrictions in place for the foreseeable future, including but not limited to requiring proof of vaccination. There are varying degrees of travel restrictions within the United States as well as more restrictions in other countries. Based on conversations with United Methodist Communications teams on the ground in various countries, a number of countries otherwise desirable for regional hubs have restrictions on travel and on how many people may gather in a location. In addition, many United Methodist Church entities are not allowing travel until fall of 2021. All of this makes it difficult to arrange travel for a large number delegates to regional satellite locations, which requires obtaining visas for delegates and choosing locations that will allow entry from all of the necessary countries. It is impossible to guarantee the ability of delegates to travel to a site or sites worldwide.
- **Vaccine:** Many countries have not yet approved a vaccine, and others that have are not projected to have access to enough of it for the world to be vaccinated in 2021.

- Testing: Many residents of states and countries do not have access to free or accessible testing to ensure they are virus free. Testing in these areas is possible, but tests are often paid for by individuals. This makes it difficult for delegates to gain access to the location by complying with travel restrictions requiring test results.

3. Credentials and Voting

- Voting: Devices are available for use, but there is no guarantee that the person using them to vote was the person who was supposed to be voting. It was determined that verification technologies such as fingerprint and retinal scan would fall into the category of possible but not feasible when balancing the investment of resources against the desired outcome. Even using these verification steps would not completely eliminate the possibility of identity theft and fraud from the system, and they would come with a substantial cost and be difficult to implement.
- Delegate/Reserve: General Conference personnel (staff or volunteer) would need to be sent worldwide to verify identity of delegates (and reserves as necessary), which is not possible due to travel bans. It would be difficult to get trained staff or volunteer staff members into the areas. The pressure upon a member of the annual, jurisdictional, or central conference to participate in any plan to avoid or undercut the credentialing process could be significantly more difficult to overcome without the presence of neutral credentialing officers. The requirements put into place by the Commission on the General Conference following the system review in summer/fall 2019 and its findings make this level of concern very real. If such a gathering were to be planned, the implementation of any credentialing process would need to focus on the personnel available and their training and ability to perform those tasks independent of any local pressure, real or perceived. The involvement of the Committee on Credentials to deliberate and recommend resolutions to any challenges would be difficult, but not impossible. However, it is important to note that this committee functions only when the General Conference is in session since its work is to culminate in advice to the Secretary of the General Conference and/or a report to the General Conference in plenary session.

4. Financial Cost

- Budget: The current budget includes costs for the 2020 session of General Conference to be held in Minneapolis. It does not include an earlier electronic meeting (and all investment and travel which comes with it) and a second in-person meeting. In order to see the true costs of the hub model with satellites, the number of locations and number of delegates and staffing at each location would need to be determined. That information would impact estimates of travel costs, the cost of any visas, the amount of time needed to travel, and how much rest would be allowed on arrival. The cost of the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference was over \$3 million—a three-day meeting with a fourth day of training. Though not necessarily an accurate comparison with the cost of meeting in regional locations, it nonetheless illustrates the significant cost of a shorter-length General Conference.

5. High Risk

- Regional satellite gatherings, bringing together delegates, staff, volunteers, and others from multiple countries, pose a high level of risk as long as the pandemic continues. With 6-10 regional hubs, 50-100 or more individuals would gather at each location, some in areas where gatherings of 5 or more are currently prohibited or advised against. With the emergence of new strains of the virus that cause COVID-19 and varying access to vaccinations, it is impossible to predict how long such precautions will be necessary. Moving forward with regional gatherings poses a risk of negative perception of The UMC in all areas of the world, and much more importantly, it poses a risk of increasing rather than limiting the spread of the virus.

Members of the Technology Study Team

Carolyn Marshall, Chair, Former Secretary of the General Conference
Kim Simpson, Chair of the Commission on the General Conference
Mujinga Kashala, Vice-Chair of the Commission on the General Conference
Gary George, Secretary of the Commission on the General Conference
Joy Barrett, Annual Conference Secretary
Courtney Preston Kellner, Annual Conference Chancellor
Tom Salsgiver, Jurisdictional Secretary/Assistant to the Bishop
Ellen Beasley, Young Adult & Member of the Commission on the General Conference
Audun Westad Young Adult & Member of the Commission on the General Conference
Rachel Rol, Executive Assistant, Episcopal Office
Stanislas Kassongo, Member of the Commission on the General Conference
Emily Allen, Director of Communications of a local church
Sara Hotchkiss, Business Manager of the General Conference
Gary Graves, Secretary of the General Conference

Members of the Advisory Panel

Abby Parker Herrera, Petitions Secretary
Susan Brumbaugh, Coordinator of the Calendar
Katie Voigt, Recorder Coordinator
Brian Sigmon, Daily Christian Advocate Editor
Mike Cunningham, CALMS Administrator
Don Reasoner, Language Services
Simon Bryan, LUMI Technologies
Douglas Ward, IT Coordinator
Tedd Kidd, Logistics Design
Andrew Jensen, Producer
Becky Boland, Local Host Committee
Leonard Young, Parliamentarian

Members of the Support Team

Raquel Pérez-Molloy, Assistant Business Manager of the General Conference
Isabelle Berger, Interpreter
Karina Lashley, Interpreter
Linda Boulos, Interpreter