

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

2021 Special Session of the General Conference

These questions will be addressed by the Council of Bishops and the Commission on the General Conference within each section and will be updated periodically.

Council of Bishops

What is the reasoning behind calling a Special Session of the General Conference?

Over the past few months, work has been done by the Council of Bishops (COB) to determine how *The Book of Discipline 2016* (BOD) must be amended in order to avoid the church being unable to take next steps due to constraints found within the BOD. The COB determined a Special Session of the General Conference, called by the Council of Bishops pursuant to ¶14 of the BOD, must be convened in an online forum to allow for consideration of mail ballots as a way to act upon essential amendments to the BOD that will allow the denomination to function appropriately in all regions until an in-person General Conference can meet. The utilization of mail ballots is in alignment with the [recommendations](#) of the Technology Study Team (TST) of the Commission on the General Conference. The TST determined that, based on their research, there is no equitable way to fulfill the provisions of ¶511.4 of the BOD unless the utilization of mail ballots is engaged. ¶511.4 mandates the Commission on the General Conference to “*take the necessary measures to assure full participation of all General Conference delegates...*”

The COB has stated that the only way mail balloting can be authorized is by a convened session of the General Conference. The call for a Special Session is to satisfy this requirement.

While some have argued that the proposed “technical” work has little to do with the mission and ministry of the church, it is important for the COB to assume the leadership necessary to enable the church to function administratively so that mission and ministry can once again become a focus. It is clear that the current BOD is not designed to respond to a crisis or to necessary periods when adaptation is necessary. The amendments proposed will free the denomination administratively to move forward and can only be enacted by the delegates to the General Conference.

What will be the format for the Special Session of the General Conference?

This is an area where clear understanding and careful planning is essential. The [report](#) of the Technology Study Team of the Commission on the General Conference reveals that, based on their advance research, a General Conference cannot be conducted online and guarantee the fulfillment of ¶511.4.d mandating the Commission on the General Conference to “*take the necessary measures to assure full participation of all General Conference delegates, . . .*”

However, unless the General Conference acts on the essential amendments to *The Book of Discipline 2016* described in the accompanying document, the denomination has no mechanism to retire bishops, conduct Central and Jurisdictional Conferences, extend the budget, organize the Annual Conferences, etc. in the near future.

In keeping with the decision of the Commission on the General Conference to further postpone the in-person session, the COB believes that all meetings in 2021 would be conducted in an online format. We have consulted with the Commission on the General Conference and believe all steps required for this meeting can be achieved as outlined. We will, however, need to give advance preparation time for necessary technical work to be organized.

In conducting this Special Session, the Council readily acknowledges the unique and challenging circumstances being faced. It is believed that the value of freeing the denomination to continue functioning until such time as an in-person meeting can happen is critical. It is also recognized that in order to gain a quorum so that mail ballots can be utilized will temporarily supersede the high value placed by us, and our Book of Discipline, on universal participation.

A Special Session of the General Conference will be convened online for the purpose of securing a quorum. That assembled body would be called together to suspend the rules for the purpose of authorizing a mail ballot on the twelve (12) amendments to *The Book of Discipline 2016*. The ballot will be constructed in a simple “yes/no” format and will be sent out to all General Conference delegates. This suspension of the rules for the purpose of considering mail ballots would ensure that the provisions of ¶511.4.d would be cared for properly. The need to convene the General Conference to do this is based on the reality that our current General Conference rules have no specific provision for mail balloting. In the absence of a rule, parliamentary procedure would be the standard rule which, based on Section 45, ¶57 and Section 25, ¶5 of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised, gives the body the opportunity to suspend its rules for the purposes of conducting a mail ballot.

Following consideration of the suspension of the rules, the meeting will be adjourned, and the mail ballots will be sent to each General Conference delegate. Delegates will complete the ballot and return it to the Secretary of the General Conference for counting. The ballots will be tallied by General Conference staff and volunteer staff who will function as tellers and whose process will be monitored and audited by an independent auditing firm. The announcement of the results is anticipated to be made on July 13.

How will the Jurisdictional Conferences in July be conducted?

In keeping with the spirit of not having an in-person meeting of the General Conference in 2021 and the current struggles around vaccine distribution as well as the need to comply with local and state requirements and restrictions on large gatherings, the Jurisdictional Conferences will need to be held in an online format. Special emphasis will need to focus on the time and technical planning necessary to conduct five jurisdictional conferences simultaneously.

How do the Central Conferences fit into this scenario timeline?

It is clear, based on ¶30. Article III of the Book of Discipline, that the Central Conferences cannot meet until after the conclusion of the General Conference. The convening and subsequent balloting around the essential legislation would free the Central Conferences to conduct their meetings following the announcement of the results of the balloting. The legislation directs the Central Conferences to meet within six months of the announcement of the results of the mail ballots taken

in conjunction with the 2021 Special Session of the General Conference. The results of those ballots are expected on July 13, 2021.

In the Philippines Central Conference their meeting will be to conduct elections in order to replace the bishops whose terms have already expired but been extended due to the pandemic. The other Central Conferences will set forth a similar agenda to determine the number of bishops to be elected and the manner by which those elections will take place. However, it is important to note that any or all of those scheduled meetings may need to be further postponed/re-scheduled due to Covid-19 restrictions that may still be in place.

What about the matter of electing persons to Boards, Agencies, Judicial Council, University Senate, etc.?

The process of nomination and election of persons (delegates & bishops) to various general church responsibilities through Jurisdictional & Central Conferences is outlined in detail in ¶705 of the BOD. The process of convening and conducting the Jurisdictional Nominating Committees is complex and varies among the jurisdictions. The Jurisdictional Pool process is detailed and lengthy. The process of selecting persons to serve from the Central Conferences is also complex. Bishops and certain members of boards/agencies/committees (i.e., GCFA, University Senate, Judicial Council, etc.) are elected by the General Conference itself. These elections have specific requirements which would not be possible in a one-day Special Session.

In consultation with the General Secretaries and leaders of our various boards and agencies, it has been determined that it is not advisable to attempt to repopulate the General Boards & Agencies until the postponed 2020 General Conference and the in-person Jurisdictional Conferences can take place in 2022. Those newly formed boards and agencies would re-organize as directed by the General Conference.

Why not entertain conversation on issues like separation or the Christmas Covenant in a Special Session of General Conference and why not elect bishops, if a decision is made to do so, during Jurisdictional Conferences in 2021?

In all of the collaborative conversations that have taken place in anticipation of this decision, it has been the widespread belief that the delicate deliberations around issues of separation, which inevitably will involve extensive debate and amendments, cannot be conducted with integrity and full participation of each delegate in an online format. It is important to remember that there are multiple petitions with multiple plans for unity and separation. To choose one of these and act upon it without the ability for Christian Conferencing in any meaningful way does not seem wise or ethical.

Likewise, the necessary interviews, vetting, voting, and consecration of newly elected bishops cannot be done properly in an online format at the regular session of the Jurisdictional Conferences since they cannot be in-person meetings. This reality will necessitate each College of Bishops providing a plan for coverage of the episcopal areas until such time as elections can take place if the individual jurisdiction decides to do so. In the places where elections are determined to be

necessary, meetings will need to take place simultaneously in accordance with the provisions stated in the Book of Discipline.

It is generally believed that these critical issues must be deferred until such time as in-person gatherings can occur.

Commission on the General Conference

I am a delegate but will be unable to attend the virtual gathering May 8. Will the reserve who is present May 8 be mailed the subsequent ballot, or will I?

Ballots will be mailed to the delegates elected and certified on Section I of the Certificate of Election submitted by each annual conference secretary unless the secretary has notified the Secretary of the General Conference of a change in the composition of the delegation which has resulted in the advancement of a reserve delegate into the role of General Conference delegate for the remainder of the quadrennium. Any such advancement would only be in the order of election as certified by the annual conference secretary in Section II of the Certificate of Election. Temporary seating of a reserve delegate (again only in order of election) for the May 8 meeting would be handled the same as if a reserve delegate were temporarily seated during a regular session of the General Conference during a morning or afternoon session. Once the session at which the reserve delegate was seated has concluded, the primary General Conference delegate returns to the seat. The same will apply for the May 8 meeting and subsequent mail ballot.

Did the commission consider using the General Conference budget to bolster internet access for delegates for whom connection is a barrier to a fully electronic General Conference?

The [report](#) of the Technology Study Team indicates that there is a greater lack of infrastructure in some parts of the world in which The United Methodist Church is located than the General Conference budget could address on an individual basis for each and every delegate. Even if that were possible, there were other challenges to the fully electronic concept which were found to be insurmountable.

Did the commission consider gathering smaller groups of delegates for a hybrid in-person and online general conference?

Yes, this option was considered but it was determined that even gathering in small groups poses an unacceptable risk of the transmission of COVID-19. In fact, it would not be allowed in much of the world at this time.

Who can call a special session?

According to the Constitution of The United Methodist Church, a special session "may be called by the Council of Bishops, or in such other manner as the General Conference may from time to time prescribe." A special session was called by the Council of Bishops in 2019. Before that, the last

special session of the General Conference was held in 1970 as ordered by the 1968 General Conference meeting in Dallas, Texas, to deal with the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church with The Methodist Church.

What business can be considered during a special session?

The purpose of a special session shall be stated in the call, and only such business shall be transacted as is in harmony with the purpose stated in the call unless the General Conference by a two-thirds vote shall determine that other business may be transacted. (See ¶ 14)

How will the postponed 2020 General Conference be affected?

The postponed session of the 2020 General Conference is now scheduled for August 29-September 6, 2022 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. All logistical arrangements will be moved forward, including petitions, Legislative Committee selections, delegations, etc. More detailed information will be released by the Commission on the General Conference, the Secretary of the General Conference, and the Business Manager of the General Conference in an appropriate timeline.