

From the 2012 General Conference Visitor's Guide

MAIN TASKS

As the top policymaking body of the worldwide United Methodist Church, General Conference is the only body that officially speaks for the more than 12.1 million-member denomination.

During the 11-day session, the 988 delegates will revise The Book of Discipline, which regulates the manner in which local churches, annual conferences and general agencies are organized. The book includes policies regarding church membership, ordination, administration, property and judicial procedures. The assembly may modify most disciplinary paragraphs by a simple majority vote, but amending the constitution requires a two-thirds affirmative vote, followed by a two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of members voting in annual conference sessions. Revoking or changing the Articles of Religion or the Confession of Faith requires a two-thirds affirmative vote by the delegates; three-fourths of the annual conference members must also agree.

Delegates also revise The Book of Resolutions, a volume declaring the church's stance on a variety of social justice issues. The more than 300 statements in the book are considered instructive and persuasive but are not binding on members.

In addition, the assembly approves plans and budgets for churchwide programs for the next four years and elects members of the Judicial Council and University Senate.

KEY PEOPLE

Delegates: Each annual conference elects equal numbers of lay and clergy delegates to General Conference, and every annual conference is guaranteed at least one lay and one clergy delegate.

Just as the U.S. Congress redistricts every 10 years following a national census, the number of lay and clergy delegates to be elected from each annual conference changes each quadrennium based on the number of lay and clergy members. The Book of Discipline limits the total number of delegates to 1,000. The 2012 conference has 988 delegates, with an increased number of delegates from Africa and Asia.

Groups of churches in Africa, Asia and Europe are known as "central conferences." Central conferences will have 372 delegates, up 96 from the 2008 assembly and 186 from the gathering in 2004. Of the total, 282 of the central conference delegates will be from Africa, up 90 from 2008. The 24 annual conferences in the Philippines will have 48 delegates, the 21 conferences in Europe will have 42, and an additional 10 delegates will come from "concordat" churches with which the denomination has a formal relationship: four from Great Britain and two each from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Caribbean and the Americas. The United Methodist Church has special covenant relationships with the Methodist traditions in those countries.

Bishops: All bishops, active and retired, attend the conference but do not vote and may not speak in plenary sessions without permission from the assembly. Individual bishops preside over business sessions, normally serving for one morning, afternoon or evening period. A General Conference committee selects presiding bishops, and each presiding bishop selects another bishop to serve as a parliamentarian.

Conference Officials: The secretary of the General Conference is the Rev. L. Fitzgerald "Gere" Reist II, a member of the Susquehanna Annual Conference and pastor at Grace United Methodist Church in Harrisburg, Pa. The treasurer is Moses Kumar, general secretary of the General Council on Finance and Administration. The

conference's business manager is the Rev. Alan J. Morrison, a staff executive with the General Council on Finance and Administration and a member of the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference.

Judicial Council: If questions related to constitutionality emerge during the conference, the United Methodist Judicial Council will meet and make a decision. The Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, a member of the South Carolina Annual Conference, is the first woman to lead the nine-member council, often called the denomination's supreme court. General Conference delegates will elect Judicial Council members who will serve during the 2013–16 quadrennium.

Worship and Music Director: The Commission on the General Conference selected Marcia McFee of Truckee, Calif., to serve as director of worship and music. McFee is a well-known worship designer and leader with experience in music, theater and dance. She has taught workshops, preached and led worship at numerous United Methodist gatherings, including as co-director at the 2008 General Conference. McFee is responsible for managing the overall worship and music program of the conference, including overseeing the liturgy and music during the assembly and inviting choirs and worship groups from across the church to participate.

Other Participants: About 2,500 visitors are expected during the 11-day meeting. That will include all members of the General Council on Finance and Administration and the Connectional Table. Chief executive officers of the 13 general church agencies and the Connectional Table will also attend.

SOURCES OF LEGISLATION

Primary sources of legislation are petitions and proposals from church agencies and organizations. Petitions must be submitted 210 days before the opening of the conference. Any organization, ordained minister or lay member of the church may petition the General Conference. Approximately 1,200 pieces of legislation are expected at the 2012 assembly.

As in the U.S. Congress, the bulk of General Conference business is conducted in legislative committees, which receive petitions and proposals, debate them and determine whether to approve, amend, combine or disapprove them for recommendation to the full body of General Conference.

All proposed legislation — from individuals, organizations, churchwide agencies and annual conferences — is printed in the Advance Daily Christian Advocate.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEES

All 13 legislative committees of the General Conference will meet in the convention center. The meetings are open to everyone, including media representatives, though space may be limited. Names of people serving on each legislative committee can be found in the Handbook for Delegates volume of the Advance Edition of the Daily Christian Advocate.

The committees review, sort and refine legislative proposals. No action is final until taken by the General Conference in plenary session. Progress reports from each committee will appear in the next day's issue of the Daily Christian Advocate.

The 13 committees and their assigned topics are:

1. Church and Society 1

This committee will receive all petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of the Board of Church and Society and the Social Principles, with the exception of paragraphs in The Book of Discipline dealing with “The Nurturing Community” and “The Social Community.”

2. Church and Society 2

All petitions and resolutions relating to “The Nurturing Community” and “The Social Community” sections of the Social Principles will be referred to this committee.

3. Conferences

This committee shall receive all petitions and resolutions relating to the composition and activities of the General, jurisdictional, annual, provisional, missionary and district conferences.

4. Discipleship

All petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of the Board of Discipleship shall be referred to this committee.

5. Faith and Order

All petitions relating to “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” the “Ministry of All Christians” and the meaning of ordination and conference membership will be referred to this committee.

6. Financial Administration

This committee shall receive all petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of the Council on Finance and Administration, the Board of Pension and Health Benefits and the United Methodist Publishing House. The budget and recommendations prepared by the General Council on Finance and Administration shall be submitted to this committee for study and review. When the General Council on Finance and Administration presents its report to the General Conference for action, the committee shall present its recommendations and may propose amendments.

7. General Administration

Petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of the Connectional Table shall be referred to this committee. The report of the Connectional Table shall be submitted to this committee for study and review. After the Connectional Table presents its report to the General Conference for action, the committee shall present its recommendations and may propose amendments.

8. Global Ministries

All petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of the Board of Global Ministries shall be referred to this committee.

9. Independent Commissions

This committee shall receive all petitions and resolutions relating to commissions and ecumenical concerns. The commissions include Archives and History, Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, Communications, Religion and Race, the Status and Role of Women, and United Methodist Men. Ecumenical concerns relate to the denomination's membership in or relationship with the World Methodist Council, the National Council of Churches, other councils and consultations of churches, and the American Bible Society.

10. Judicial Administration

This committee handles all petitions and resolutions relating to judiciary concerns and investigations, trials and appeals.

11. Local Church

This committee will receive all petitions and resolutions relating to the organization of the local church and its membership, programs, boards, councils, commissions and committees. The committee will also consider petitions relating to local church property.

12. Ministry and Higher Education

All petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry, including ordained ministries, higher education, seminaries and the Division of Chaplaincy and Related Ministries, shall be referred to this committee.

13. Superintendency

Petitions and resolutions relating to the work and concerns of bishops and district superintendents shall be referred to this committee.

A Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters will handle legislative proposals affecting central conferences.

Recommendations by a legislative committee emerging the first week of the conference are just that — recommendations. No action is final until the entire General Conference approves it. Most final actions are taken during the second week of the conference. Only the General Conference speaks officially for the denomination.

If legislation involving funding is approved by a plenary session, that action is referred to the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) and the Connectional Table (or their executive committees or expenditure review groups) for their advice and review. The groups will bring the legislation back to the assembly with specific recommendations about sources and amounts. When GCFA and the Connectional Table present their report, the Financial Administration Legislative Committee may propose amendments to these recommendations and will present its own recommendations. Only after the conference takes action on this funding proposal does the legislation take effect.

If a proposed change in the church's constitution is approved by two-thirds of General Conference delegates, that action must be ratified by a two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of annual conference members voting at their yearly gatherings. A proposal to alter one of the Articles of Religion or the Confession of Faith requires a three-fourths majority of annual conference members. No changes may take place until the Council of Bishops announces ratification.

The 2012 General Conference Visitors' Guide is produced by United Methodist Communications.

Most legislation becomes effective Jan. 1, 2013, unless the legislation specifies another date.

TRACKING LEGISLATION

Following legislation through the General Conference maze can be a challenge. Most issues come before delegates in the form of petitions sent by individuals, groups, annual conferences and governing boards of general agencies. These are found in the Advance Daily Christian Advocate and online at the General Conference website, www.gc2012.umc.org.

Each petition from an individual, local church, annual conference, general agency or other group is given a number and assigned to one of the legislative committees. Each delegate serves on a committee and spends most of the first four days in committee meetings.

Each legislative committee deals with petitions related to a series of paragraphs from The Book of Discipline. Petitions related to The Book of Resolutions are sorted by subject.

A legislative committee can recommend adopting, rejecting or referring a petition to a General Conference plenary session. That recommendation is called a “calendar item”; the item is assigned a number and printed in the Daily Christian Advocate.

If a proposal that has no financial implications and does not seek a change in the constitution receives fewer than 10 negative votes in the legislative committee, it is placed on a “consent calendar.” A vote of 20 delegates is needed to remove it from the consent calendar. If it is not removed, it is voted on with other noncontroversial items as a timesaving mechanism.

Below is a short summary of the legislative process:

- Annual conferences, local churches, general agencies and other organizations and individuals submit petitions.
- The petitions secretary assigns a petition number to each. The number indicates the legislative committee, chronological order and source. Each petition is assigned to a legislative committee.
- Petitions are printed in the Advance Edition of the Daily Christian Advocate.
- A reference committee reviews assignments by the petitions secretary. They combine petitions and make new assignments to legislative committees as necessary.
- Legislative committees review petitions and make recommendations to the plenary session.
- Reports are sent to the Daily Christian Advocate. A copy is returned to committee officers for approval and sent to the General Conference secretary for a calendar number prior to being printed in the Daily Christian Advocate.
- Plenary session acts upon calendar item.
- Adopted legislation is printed in The Book of Discipline or The Book of Resolutions. The Daily Christian Advocate becomes the official journal of General Conference.