

## Regionalization a key question for African United Methodists

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Vagris Umba (from left), Bertin Kyungu, and Adolphe Kitenge, delegates from the North Katanga Conference in Congo, listen to the morning worship at the 2016 United Methodist general conference in Portland, Oregon. (File photo by Kathleen Barry, UM News)

As the United Methodist Church counts down to this year's general conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, regionalization proposals are topmost on the minds of African leaders and delegates.

The goal of regionalization is to empower United Methodist central conferences in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines—all originally established as mission areas—to

adapt their ministries and practices to their unique regional needs.

While most African bishops and leaders have embraced regionalization, both proponents and opponents of the legislation see African votes as key in determining whether regionalization becomes reality.

Western Angola Bishop Gaspar Joao Domingos said regionalization would strike a balance of power between the United States, where the UMC originated, and central conferences.

“We do not need to take our cultural problems to the general conference,” he said. “It would be the same with America; they won’t need to bring their local issues to be discussed by other continents.”

Instead, he said, regionalization would allow the denomination’s top policymaking body to focus solely on issues that affect the whole UMC—including matters of doctrine, church growth, and evangelization.

“To maintain the current state of the church is a kind of colonization where ideas come from one point, which feels like the older brother who will solve all our problems,” Domingos said.

Groups have submitted legislation for three regionalization plans to the coming general conference.

The UMC’s constitution already gives central conferences the authority to make “such changes and adaptations” to the *Book of Discipline*, the denomination’s policy book, as missional needs and differing legal contexts require. Central conferences [are already exercising that authority in various ways](#).

However, passing any of the regionalization plans requires amending the denomination’s constitution—a high bar. To be ratified, amendments to the denomination’s constitution require a two-thirds vote of the general conference followed by a two-thirds aggregate vote of the lay and clergy members present and voting in annual conferences, the denomination’s regional bodies.

Bishops preside at both the general conference and annual conference sessions, but they do not have a vote.

Still, other African United Methodists object to regionalization, seeing it as a way to allow more permissive policies related to homosexuality.

“Regionalization does not go far enough to assure Africans that their position against the affirmation of same-gender relationships will not be compromised under the so-called big-tent theological umbrella,” [said Forbes Matonga](#), head of the West Zimbabwe delegation to the general conference. He is also a leader in the Africa Initiative, an unofficial traditionalist advocacy group.

He noted that while elected in different regions, United Methodist bishops serve the whole church. That means, he said, that a gay bishop elected in the US also is a bishop for Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The US Western Jurisdiction has elected two openly gay and married bishops in recent years.

“For as long as the Council of Bishops itself is not regionalized, then this whole talk of regionalization is a smokescreen,” Matonga said.

Currently, the denomination’s Social Principles—part of the *Book of Discipline* that deals with the church’s social witness—defines marriage as between a man and a woman and describes the practice of homosexuality as “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Another part of the *Book of Discipline* bans “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy and same-sex weddings.

Under the regionalization plans, the Social Principles would continue to apply to the whole denomination—with only the general conference authorized to vote on any revisions.

But regionalization would enable all regions, including the US, to adapt parts of church administration and procedures within their own cultural and legal contexts. Already, central conferences adapt clergy ordination requirements based on their needs.

George K. Weagba, a veteran general conference delegate from Liberia, said he knows some people conflate regionalization with homosexuality, but he does not see that as the case.

He said he believes regionalization would be good for the future of the UMC as it is something the church already practiced. He cited, as an example, that ordination

requirements in Africa were different from that of the US.

“Regionalization primarily advocates for equity,” he said. “I want to see the church in Africa benefit equally from the resources of the general church. If it means an agency of the general church is placed in Africa, another in Asia, Europe, and then the US, we will be on course with things.”

Church advocacy groups operating in Africa have taken different stands on regionalization. The traditionalist Africa Initiative and the likeminded Wesleyan Covenant Association and Good News have all come out against it. Those groups seek to make it easier for annual conferences in the central conferences and individual churches to leave the UMC for the new traditionalist Global Methodist Church, which launched in 2022.

Simon Mafunda, who lives in Zimbabwe, is the Wesleyan Covenant Association’s vice president for Africa strategy and also part of the Africa Initiative. He said the regionalization plan is not an option for Africa.

“I personally refer to it as a segregation plan designed to muzzle the voices of Africa, which is fast dominating the GC floor,” he said. “It gives even more powers and control to America.”

Mafunda, a longtime lay leader and former member of the standing committee on central conference matters, noted that he has repeatedly asked why the regionalization plans leaves the five US jurisdictions intact. That would give the US four administrative layers, compared to three in other regions, he said.

The standing committee’s proposed regionalization legislation does mandate a study to examine whether the US should continue to have jurisdictions. Unlike central conferences, jurisdictions do not have authority to adapt the *Book of Discipline*.

“Regionalization is a sure way of dismantling the unity that should actually bind us together as a denomination,” Mafunda said. “We cannot regionalize the Bible, especially when it comes to the issue of human sexuality. I believe my voice here represents many voices in Africa, who are saying ‘no’ to regionalization.”

Meanwhile, the newly formed United Methodist Africa Forum held a January meeting of African delegates [that both endorsed regionalization and insisted that the church continue to define marriage as between a man and a woman.](#)

Gabriel Banga Mususwa, general secretary of the United Methodist Africa Forum, said the church should remain united in Africa and denounced calls for disaffiliation. He reiterated there was a need for each region to deal with issues affecting them without heading to the general conference.

“If we are honest to each other and faithful to God’s work, we may genuinely agree that delegates to the general conference outside the USA finds themselves discussing on US-centered issues. It’s rare African or Philippine issues are discussed at the general conference, very rare.”

The regionalization question has dominated African United Methodist gatherings. On February 10, the church in South Congo held a special session to hear different views on the issue. The meeting, which drew 800 church leaders, was intended to enable them to gain a better understanding of the issue.

Retired Congo Central Bishop David Yemba said regionalization would allow United Methodists to concentrate and focus on issues of interest in their region.

“We need to improve what we already have in the central conferences,” he said, “not just change the name but give content to this concept.” —United Methodist News Service