

Structure and power

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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The General Conference of the United Methodist Church convened in Tampa last week. I'm not one of the 988 delegates who have descended on Florida to do the work of our church, nor of the 4,000 hosts, bishops, pages, translators and myriad lobbyists there to help. My participation is limited to [following the proceedings](#) from 1,000 miles away.

Still, my emotions have been all over the place. And judging from Twitter and Facebook, this [roller coaster of highs and lows](#) is almost universal among those who are there. The stakes feel high this year, higher than usual.

The General Conference is once again considering questions surrounding human sexuality. Will we ordain non-celibate LGBTQ people? Can clergy perform same-sex unions or marriages? These and related questions, particularly around language in our book of discipline defining ["the practice of" homosexuality as "incompatible with Christian teaching,"](#) have been debated at every General Conference since the 1970s. The difference now, of course, is that while the [increasing majority of Americans--including many Christians--are now in favor of gay marriage and full inclusion](#), the UMC is growing in nations where there is significantly less support for inclusion.

When a motion to strike this exclusionary language failed to make it out subcommittee--by four votes--a colleague who's on the subcommittee posted this to Facebook: "It is a real culture war between the African & United States churches."

Her words--so clear, so fraught--gave me pause. In the UMC, as in the Anglican Communion, the numbers are growing in conservative places outside the U.S.--so conservatives are suggesting that their way is the way. They are the ones bringing the growth by sharing the light of Christ. But these centers of growth want to continue to exclude those who comprise the mission field for me and mine.

The larger issue before this General Conference is the proposed restructuring of the UMC. The primary plan to do so, "The Call to Action," came out of a study conducted

by an outside consulting firm. The plan, which would drastically streamline church authority, later gathered the support of the Council of Bishops and a number of large churches within the connection.

There's no question that the UMC is changing. But opponents object to the CtA's notion that streamlining authority is the way to spur growth--and they're troubled by the sense that these changes arise from a culture of fear and/or corporate organization.

In a rather stunning reversal, Friday morning saw the death of the CtA proposal in the General Administration Legislative Committee. After months of supporters disseminating information and garnering support for the plan, it was rejected--and the committee began amending "[Plan B.](#)" Saturday night, all the plans offered were defeated, and a mood of general frustration settled set in on all sides.

Bishop Will Willimon [said](#) that this turn of events was a result of "the wrong people" voting at General Conference, people brought to Tampa through elections carried out by a broken system. It remains to be seen whether General Conference 2012 will ultimately bring about any restructuring of the UMC.

Those who brought the Call to Action forward emphasize the need to eschew loyalties to dead and burdensome institutional structures and to focus on mission and ministry. They say opponents don't trust the bishops and are afraid of success.

I don't distrust the bishops. They seem a diverse and thoughtful group. But I distrust two things about this vision: the reliance on numerical indicators of success, and a lack of understanding about how institutions work.

A lot of Methodist megachurch pastors support the plan. Of course, in terms of theology and church culture, Methodist megachurches often share more with Rick Warren than with John Wesley. These pastors are surely doing some things right, but that doesn't mean they know what's best for all churches, or that they know best how to be faithful to the gospel. Crowds flocked to hear Jesus, but he was awfully ambivalent about their acclaim.

The current UMC structure is unwieldy and confusing. But its structure is also its strength. It balances power nicely; it creates lots of places at the table. And, much like our political system, it is able to accomplish a lot of good--though slowly.

Jim Winkler, chair of the General Board of the Church of Society, described the situation well in a [recent blog post](#). I'd choose Jim Winkler's wisdom over Rick Warren's any day, but our current structure means I don't ever have to. We United Methodists separate money and influence and power in a way Saddleback Church never will.