

Questions, anger follow UMC conference delay

by [Heather Hahn](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue



A view of the stage at the 2019 United Methodist general conference—the last time a general conference was held. (Photo by Kathleen Barry, United Methodist News Service)

United Methodists reacted to their general conference’s third postponement—this time to 2024—with emotions ranging from outrage to relief. Many also expressed weariness with the uncertainty that has faced the United Methodist Church since before the pandemic.

The hope was that the denomination’s top lawmaking body would resolve the UMC’s longtime debate over LGBTQ inclusion and avoid costly litigation by adopting a formal separation plan.

The most popular of these proposals, the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, would allow theologically conservative churches and annual conferences—church regional bodies—to leave with property and \$25 million in UMC funds to form a new denomination.

Some theological conservatives are now saying that they no longer are waiting for the general conference to act but instead launching that new denomination, the Global Methodist Church, on May 1.

Andy Bryan is among the general conference delegates who see the third postponement as regrettable but necessary.

“I both understand the reasoning behind it and at the same time lament the further harm the delay will inevitably produce,” said Bryan, chair of the Missouri Conference delegation and lead pastor of Manchester UMC in Missouri. He said the pastors of his church are on record as wanting to remain United Methodist and work toward inclusion.

“For Manchester, the delay will mean a few more years in the wilderness,” he said. “We continue to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, seeking creative ways to be in mission and ministry as ambassadors of God’s unconditional love.”

Kalema Tambwe, a clergy delegate from eastern Congo, said holding the general conference this year ran the risk of seeing many delegates absent because they had difficulties related to vaccinations and obtaining visas.

He hopes that by 2024 “many people will already be vaccinated, and on the international level, the problems of movement of people will not be able to arise so that we can attend the general conference in this large family.”

However, the delay has sparked anger, especially from theological conservatives who have called for the ability to leave the UMC in an orderly fashion.

In an essay for the Wesleyan Covenant Association, a theologically conservative advocacy group, Joseph F. DiPaolo announced that he had resigned from the general conference commission. He argued that the decision to postpone was both unwise and unnecessary.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association has been shepherding the formation of the Global Methodist Church, and DiPaolo serves on the association’s leadership council.

Kim Simpson, the general conference commission chair, said that moving the general conference was the commission's decision by majority vote.

"The commission's responsibility is not to ensure that the postponed general conference would be held as scheduled this summer but to take necessary measures to assure full participation of all general conference delegates," she said.

The delay is difficult for the denomination's progressives, too.

"At the end of the day, I think we are all becoming weary and drained from waiting for the inevitable in perpetuity," said Jessica Vittorio, a general conference delegate from the North Texas Conference.

Alka Lyall, chair of the Northern Illinois Conference delegation, is the senior pastor of Chicago's Broadway United Methodist Church, a congregation that has long welcomed and advocated for its LGBTQ members.

However, she said she respects that some members feel they have to leave for their own survival.

She called the denomination's current stance—that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching"—both painful and harmful.

"But the delay in getting it changed does not impact our ability to love all people of God," she said. "The delay gives the denomination an opportunity to slow down, sit back and reevaluate what we are being called to do and be." —United Methodist News. Sam Hodges, Jim Patterson, Tom Kim, Chadrack Longe, E Julu Swen, and Phileas Jusu also contributed to this report.