

Beyond Soundbites and Towards Holy Conferencing

(A Series on the Actions of
General Conference)



By Michael Roberts with input from the Delegation of the Arkansas Conference.
Topics include Abortion, Clergy Qualifications, Marriage, Israel, and Pronouns

General Conference and Abortion

In some communications circulating about what happened at General Conference, what is being said about Abortion is particularly shocking. On this topic, we read that General Conference affirmed a “right to abortion,” renounced “abortion bans,” and adopted an overall position that is “pro-choice.” The words in quotation are in the commentaries. They are not, however, found in the actual statement that came out of General Conference.

In the statement from the Social Principles, there is one sentence that says, “In these limited circumstances, we support the legal option of abortion.” This is not described as a “right.” It is a conviction shared out of love and concern. The limited circumstances include when the life of the mother is in danger and there are no other medical treatments and when severe abnormalities threaten the viability of the fetus. The whole statement shares a “commitment to the sanctity of human life.” It “unconditionally rejects it as an acceptable means of birth control or a mechanism for gender selection.” It “supports measures requiring parental or guardian...consent.” It opposes “late-term or partial birth abortion.” It urges the seeking of “medical advice and pastoral counseling...” It also speaks against “bullying or shaming people for their decisions or actions.” There are also strong statements in support of access to reproductive health, especially for those who often have limited access. There are statements supporting treatments for infertility. There are no statements about “abortion bans” and the phrase “pro-choice” is not used at all.

In one letter that is being circulated, we read of how the following words were deleted: “We are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child” (a statement from the previous Social Principles). With the new and revised Social Principles, vetted through multiple sessions of holy conferencing around the world, these exact words are not there. The sentiment, however, is expressed throughout, speaking of “the sanctity of life,” the “tragic conflicts of life with life,” and “the life of the fetus.”

In this context, it may be worth comparing our statement to that found in the Social Witness of the GMC. On the topic of abortion, the GMC statement is relatively short. It is only two sentences long. It uses the term “sacredness” instead of “sanctity.” With a similar statement of exceptions, it “compels us to resist the practice of abortion, except in the cases of tragic conflict of life against life...” It says, “we do not accept abortion as a means of birth control or gender selections,” where the Social Principles of the UMC uses the phrase “unconditionally rejects.”

The GMC statement could possibly be considered a brief summary of the much more detailed and arguably stronger UMC statement. It would be so very-extremely-incredibly wrong to use this brief statement to stir up division, without conversation, based on what it does not say or to make it say something that it doesn't to support one's own agenda. That would be deceptive, to put it mildly. At the very least, the differences here are not enough to warrant schism and the great harm that that causes within the Body of Christ.

To prepare for holy conferencing, and at the beginning of this series, it may be helpful to note that the Social Principles of the UMC do not carry the weight of doctrine or foundational teachings. They are “not church law” but instead “represent the prayerful and earnest efforts of the General Conference to speak to issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation.” These principles are “intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit,” while recognizing that the church is a “living body gathered from the many and diverse parts of the human community,” with a calling to love one another well in the midst of diverse understandings. For a brief comparison, the preliminary Social Witness of the GMC, to be brought to their convening Conference, is intended to offer a “consensus vision transcending cultures” with expectations for congregations and those in leadership to affirm, endorse, and subscribe to the positions therein. In preliminary documents, it will require a three-quarters majority vote at the convening General Conference to make changes to the statements.

For more information, a draft of the Revised Social Principles is linked [here](#). The final version is being prepared for publication. The full statement on this topic can be found on pages 28-29.



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THAN WE SOMETIMES HERE ON THE ACTIONS OF GENERAL CONFERENCE.
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General Conference and Clergy Qualifications

When it comes to who Churches and Boards of Ordained Ministry can consider as candidates for ministry, one restriction was removed. That one restriction centered around the word “incompatible” for one group of people. Now candidates can be considered based on their calling and character, faithfulness and fruitfulness, without this one barrier standing in the way. Putting this in context, it is worth noting all the qualifications that remain. The qualifications to be considered for ordained ministry include faith in Christ, gifts for ministry, affirmation of the holy scriptures, accountability to the doctrinal standards of the church, and more. This list is long and life-giving for the church as a whole. In all of the rhetoric, with much of it intended to cultivate division, this context is important if we are to make faithful decisions.

General Conference also removed the statement that called clergy to practice “faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness.” This has led to accusations of opening the door to polygamy, fornication, adultery, and immorality, even when there are other statements that directly address these concerns. Putting this in context, it could be said that the call to a moral life was strengthened, not weakened. The General Conference added a call for “fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, mutual consent, and growth in the grace and in the knowledge and love of God.” What blessings might come if our ministry focused on the cultivation of these values for all? This statement opens the way to evaluate relationships by much more than a marriage license, especially when, up to this point, some legal marriages would not have been recognized by the church because of a statement that was used to keep people out.

Since much of the negative rhetoric is coming from those committed to the GMC, it may be good to make some comparisons. Most of the qualifications in their statement resonate well with those of the UMC. On this one consideration, the GMC statement calls for “fidelity in a Christian marriage between one man and one woman” and “chastity [rather than celibacy] in singleness.” In the GMC, this criteria also extends to laity serving in the church. In the experience of pastors, more and more couples who have come to talk about getting married are older and already partners together. That is reality. Some are active in the church and perhaps called to explore ordained ministry. Depending on how this rule was enforced, they could not be considered. General Conference, in 2024 and in the contexts in which we find ourselves, has opened the way for us to name and encourage the values that are life-giving for all, and to affirm the blessings of marriage for all who feel called into this commitment (which will be the topic of the next post).

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General Conference and Marriage

Information beyond soundbites may be the key to the faithful work of finding agreement, building consensus, and making faithful decisions. What does the Book of Discipline say about marriage? Marriage is affirmed as “a sacred and lifelong covenant,” a union with “one another and into a deeper relationship with God and the community of faith.” This is important because it calls those getting married in the church to be a part of the faith community. In terms of policy, it might be helpful to start here, trusting that marriages in the church would be for those whom some in the congregation, including the pastor, would have already given a blessing. A relationship would have already been formed.

Our new principles allow for the understanding of marriage to be between two persons or between one man and one woman. This change opens the way to consider matters of human sexuality with humility and to focus on the virtues that are life-giving for all, rather than a double standard for some. It allows us to remain true to the primary purpose of marriage, in the Wesleyan tradition – to grow in holiness and to “reflect a continued willingness to grow together in Christ...and cultivate a covenantal bond that encompasses intimacy, grace, and love.” We can turn once again to the call for “fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, mutual consent, and growth in the grace and in the knowledge and love of God.” (For more on this statement see the previous post on Clergy Qualifications; that is the context for this understanding of the values needed for a healthy marriage and life-giving relationships in general).

Next, there is an affirmation of civil marriage, the legal recognition of domestic unions by the state which is vital for guaranteeing family stability, regulation of inheritances, and assuring the rights, benefits, and protections for spouses and children. This is why marriages through the church also require a license. With the expansion of our understanding, room is made to bless marriages in different cultural contexts and to honor the norms and laws in different countries. One country does not get to dictate the practices of another.

There is so much more within the statement, including paragraphs on child marriage, polygamy, and a careful statement on divorce, which “may become a regrettable but necessary alternative when marital relationships are strained beyond repair or become destructive...” It is made clear that “we do not support efforts to withhold ministry from divorced persons...”

In making faithful decisions, it may be helpful to note what the GMC says. There is one short statement: “We believe that human sexuality is a gift of God that is to be affirmed as it is exercised within the legal and spiritual covenant of a loving and monogamous marriage between one man and one woman.” One question might be: Is this the only way to understand human sexuality? From a UMC perspective, human sexuality is expressed in many ways, from our style and dress to our natural attractions, to how we interact with one another. It can be expressed through our desire for intimacy at all levels of relationship, from holding hands, to a kiss, to decisions about commitments and the how we might express the values listed above. The affirmation, support, forgiveness, grace, and teachings of the church can be helpful all along the way.

Within the GMC Provisional Discipline, marriage comes up in one other place, in the non-discrimination policy for lay persons in ministry. We read, “There shall be no discrimination on the basis of gender, race, color...” and then there is one exception: “As a part of our witness, individuals employed by the church shall subscribe to the doctrinal and moral standards of the Global Methodist Church and give evidence of the same in their life and ministry, including faithfulness in marriage, understood to be between one man and one woman, or chastity in singleness.” A person who may not fit into this strict definition cannot serve in ministry, regardless of calling, character, faithfulness and fruitfulness.

In terms of developing a wedding policy, it is possible to start with the trust of the pastor as the one who develops relationship with a couple and who make decisions about marriage in the church, and to keep the policy more about the logistics of building use. It is possible to have a position that honors more than one perspective on same-sex weddings in the church, hopefully with much agreement and support of our understanding of marriage as a whole. It is possible to make policy statements about allowing, or not allowing, same-sex weddings. It would be advised to do this by seeking consensus and with careful discernment around all that the Book of Discipline says. Rushing into a vote is often divisive and causes harm.

For one more new statement, the Book of Discipline says that no one, pastor or congregation, will be “penalized for performing or refraining from performing a same-sex wedding.” As with so many statements in the Social Principles, the hope is to make room and give grace. The focus is more on how we treat one another than it is on giving hardline stances. The hope is unity, not division. As we navigate this new territory, It might be helpful to compare our life together in a faith community with that of a marriage, remembering that the scriptures also use this analogy. What might this look like? How might we navigate our discernment together through this lens? How might we love with patience, kindness, and with a humility that does not insist on its own way?

A draft of the Revised Social Principles, before amendments, is linked [here](#) . The statement on marriage, before the change to add “between one man and one woman,” can be found on pages 22-23.

This series is intended to give a more complete and gracious read than we sometimes here on the actions of General Conference.
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General Conference and the Israel-Palestine Conflict

The way this conflict is being used in soundbites, for the purpose of cultivating more division, needs to be challenged. In one document that is being shared, it is reported that the General Conference voted “to lobby the U.S. government to end military aid to Israel.” The insinuation is that the UMC is anti-Israel.

One petition that is being used to cast shade on the UMC, in its original form, focused on the lack of “a just and lasting peace for the Palestinian people.” (Resolution R6111, found in the Book of Resolutions since 2004). Through the committee debate, this was changed to “both peoples.” The original petition urged “the U.S. government to end all military aid.” This was changed to “all governments.” Even the original petition did not say military aid “to Israel,” as the report claims,” but “in the whole region.” The call was to redistribute funds to support the work of “humanitarian health and educational work...” The resolution calls for support of ecumenical and interfaith bodies that advocate for Palestinian self-determination, while affirming “Israel’s right to exist within secure borders.” It calls for “the Palestinian Authority and Palestine religious and political leaders to continue to publicly condemn violence against Israeli civilians and to use nonviolent acts of disobedience to resist the occupation and the illegal settlements.” This, and the other resolutions that deal with this conflict, are calls for peace, according to the call of Jesus and the scriptures.

It is important to note that this came to the Conference in the form of a Resolution. Any and every United Methodist can submit a resolution to be considered with the title of their choice. We should not be drawn in by the title alone. The Israel-Palestine conflict was the subject of several resolutions that were debated and voted upon in committees. On the whole, these resolutions are non-binding and have no financial implications. Those that pass (sometimes with significant alterations) become the perspective of the majority within the committee at General Conference, offered for guidance and discernment – not as law.

Given the nature of Resolutions in general, and the content of these resolutions, there does not seem to be enough to warrant calls for more division among us. All of us can find resolutions with which we would disagree, or at least would restate in another way. They are offered for guidance and discernment, from elected delegates from around the world. They do not justify schism and the harm that brings to the body of Christ.

A link to the Book of Resolutions 2016 can be found [here](#). The new edition is being prepared for publication. In this version, resolutions concerning Israel and Palestine can be found on pages 602-610.

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General Conference and Pronouns

In response to videos that are circulating to show people introducing themselves at General Conference, with the intent of stirring up division, it is important to remember that there were thousands of speeches at General Conference, on the floor and in committees. These videos, making the rounds on social media, show a selective and small sampling. They are acts of deception. The slow cadence that is highlighted and made fun of was encouraged as a way to honor the many languages represented and to assist interpreters. The encouragement for each speaker to identify themselves as clergy or laity, along with their conference, age, ethnicity, sex, and with other identifiers important to the speaker, was about making room for all voices and honoring all children of God. This was monitored and on one day it was reported that just over 50% of those speaking at mics that day were female, which was a first in the history of General Conference. It is sad to see people making fun of what could be described as an intentional effort to model the very kin'dom of God.

In many gatherings in our world today, there are those who encourage the naming of pronouns as a part of the way we introduce ourselves, typically using the phrase, "my pronouns are he-him, she-her, they-them, he-they, etc." This was not required at General Conference, nor was it something asked for by the monitors. Many did choose to add these identification markers. From the perspective of many, receiving this graciously and with an open heart was (and is) a good thing. Even if there are only a few (or even only one) who prefer non-binary pronouns, giving such grace can be seen as a way to love one another well. Even if there is disagreement, why dis-grace this perspective? What purpose is served by casting negative perceptions with words like elitist, woke, and accusations of not believing in the Bible? These are some of the comments that are being widely shared among us. Truth is found in a more complete and gracious read.