

Constitutional Amendments
2009 Holston Annual Conference
Pre-Conference Briefing Information

The process to amend the constitution of the United Methodist Church is difficult for a reason. Passage of amendments to the constitution requires a super-majority (2/3) vote of both the General Conference and all annual conferences throughout the connection. That strict requirement ensures that fundamental revisions of our doctrine, polity, and missional structure are not made without full opportunity for debate and discussion of the proposed changes and the implications of such change. Once constitutional amendments have been approved, the General Conference may act legislatively to enable application of the constitutional changes with only a simple majority vote. Therefore, each amendment should be considered prayerfully, carefully, and according to your understanding of our United Methodist theology and doctrine before you cast your vote.

Proposed Amendments III, IV, V, VII, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XVI, XVIII, XX, XXI, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, XXX, XXXI, and XXXII

The recommendation of the Holston Conference delegation on the 23 proposed constitutional amendments related to the worldwide nature of the United Methodist Church (proposed amendments III, IV, V, VII, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XVI, XVIII, XX, XXI, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, XXX, XXXI, and XXXII) is to vote “No” on the proposed amendments. The vote of the delegation on these amendments was 12 against the amendments and 1 for the amendments.

The General Conference delegation affirms the global nature of the United Methodist Church and the World Methodist family. We recognize that the study and discussion of the United Methodist Church’s role in Christian ministry around the world is ongoing and has been so for a number of years. We believe that the conversation needs to continue under the guidance of the study committee authorized by action of the 2008 General Conference.

The stated rationale for the approval of these amendments is to allow “the General Conference to create similar structures for all of our world-wide church. Each Annual Conference would belong to a Regional Conference which would be able to organize sub-units called Jurisdictional Conferences.” Since the conclusion of General Conference 2008, the Judicial Council has ruled that approval of the proposed amendments “would mandate creation of a regional conference or regional conferences in the United States. . . . [and] the 2012 General Conference must enact enabling legislation in order to create a U.S. regional conference or regional conferences.” Judicial Council Decision No. 1100 (10/25/2008). During debate on the floor of General Conference 2008, an argument in favor of approval was advanced that the proposed amendments will provide a framework for and facilitate the further work of the study committee.

Having considered the stated rationale and the debate on the floor of General Conference on these amendments, the Holston delegation is concerned that the result of approving these amendments will be to lock the study committee into a particular course of action rather than allowing it to explore a variety of opportunities for the United Methodist Church to fully participate in worldwide Christian ministry. Clearly, the Judicial Council has offered its view that approval of these amendments will result in mandatory changes to the structure of the United Methodist Church. Before we vote to change the constitution of the church, we need to clarify the issues involved and know with certainty what the actual result of those changes will be. Currently, there is too much confusion about the effect of the approval of these constitutional

amendments on the distinctive nature of the church as well as the further work of the study committee.

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Proposed Amendment I (Paragraph 4)

The Holston Conference delegation makes no recommendation for approval or rejection of Proposed Constitutional Amendment I. Following our process of discussion and discernment regarding a recommendation, we realize that we are not of one mind on the issues raised by the proposed amendment.

The General Conference delegation affirms that God’s grace is for all and that we are called to inclusiveness in our Christian ministry and witness.

The stated rationale for the approval of this amendment is to emphasize “the wideness of God’s mercy and the availability of the ministry of the church to all.” The proposed amendment came before General Conference as a proposal for gender inclusiveness in the affected paragraph of the constitution. The current paragraph includes a list of specific protected classes modifying the term “all persons.” That list reads: “race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.” Noticeably absent from the list is a reference to gender inclusion.

The current paragraph specifically identifies groups protected from discrimination in the activities of the United Methodist Church. Presumably, this list has developed during the past forty years during a process of discussion, debate, and legislative action. We hear and understand the argument that, as a church, we demonstrate true inclusiveness when we avoid labels and acknowledge that “all” means all. On the other hand, we recognize the value of the legislative tradition that resulted in the careful choice of the specific groups named in this paragraph.

Ongoing discussion is occurring in the United Methodist Church regarding the authority of the pastor of a local congregation to make the determination of particular persons’ readiness to take the vows of membership and to be received into membership in the United Methodist Church. Many are concerned about the potential for exercising such authority in ways that are discriminatory and contrary to our Christian witness. In that context, this change may be viewed as a positive step toward reconciling our statements and our conduct as a church. The counter-argument follows that the language of the proposed amendment apparently shifting the responsibility for determining readiness for membership from the pastor to the person seeking membership is inconsistent with our Methodist heritage and tradition acknowledged by the most recent ruling of the Judicial Council on that issue. *See* Judicial Council Decision No. 1032 (10/29/2005). Approving the proposed change in language may invite the Judicial Council to define the term “all persons” and affect the current understanding of pastoral authority on issues of church membership.

We are confident that our pastoral leaders take seriously the importance of helping those persons expressing a desire to become members of local congregations to discern readiness for the commitment embodied in the vows of membership. We are equally confident that our pastoral leaders affirm through their ministries that all persons stand in need of God's grace and acknowledge the potential harm arising from preventing the access of any person to the means of grace – particularly when the person being so denied is different from us. We serve a God and risen Savior who is no respecter of persons. Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11.

Our struggle lies in whether we leave the resolution of this issue to our historical understanding of Methodist doctrine, the uncertainty of judicial action, or the possibility of future legislative action. As a delegation, we are unable to reach consensus on that issue.

Proposed Amendment II

The proposed amendment requires the adoption of ethics and conflict of interest policies to ensure accountability and fiduciary integrity. The Holston Conference delegation recommends that you vote “no” on this proposed amendment. The rationale for voting “no” is that the mandatory language in the Constitution is too broad. If approved, this amendment would require every group in each local United Methodist Church to impose ethics and conflict of interest policies. Groups would include, but not be limited to UMW, UMM, UMYF, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, all “groups” in ministry at a local UMC. Not every “group” needs an ethics and conflict of interest policy. Mandatory language this unnecessary encourages disregard for that portion of the Discipline which also affects the rest of the Discipline. Legislation is already being drafted for the 2012 General Conference by Conference Chancellors to place appropriate ethics and conflict of interest policy requirement in the book of discipline

Proposed Amendment XIX (Paragraph 35)

Like the amendments related to the worldwide nature of the church, this amendment is also affected by an on-going study. The study on the ordering of ministry was continued throughout the 2008-2012 quadrennium. This study will include the gathering of input and reflection regarding the historic and present role of local pastors in the life of the church. The delegation had some reservations about recommending approval of this amendment prior to this study's report. At the same time, the delegation affirmed the on-going contribution of those who serve as associate members, provisional members, and local pastors and some were comfortable with the passage of this amendment at this time. The delegation chose not to make a recommendation regarding approval or rejection of this amendment and leaves it to the wisdom of the annual conference to discern the best response.

Remaining Amendments

On all remaining amendments, the Holston Conference delegation recommends voting “yes” for each one.

Amendment VI – yes
Amendment VIII – yes
Amendment IX – yes
Amendment XV – yes
Amendment XVII – yes
Amendment XXII – yes