

FATE OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD

by Lonnie D. Brooks

The report of the Commission on a Way Forward (CWF) to the United Methodist General Conference of 2019 is set up to be impaled on a three pronged pitchfork.

At the recently completed annual meeting of the Alaska Conference, Donna Pritchard, a member of the CWF and the senior pastor of First UMC in Portland OR, told us that the report in which the recommended option is the One Church Model will, among other things, include a provision for each “annual conference” fully to fund its own bishop.

There are at least two things wrong with that. 1) Not every annual conference even has its own bishop. Alaska, for example, shares a bishop with two other conferences—the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference, and the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference. 2) The UM Judicial Council, our highest “court,” already ruled in [Decision 1208](#) that regional funding of the episcopacy is contrary to the UM Constitution, and I don’t think there is any way to avoid the implications of that decision without an amendment to the Constitution, which Donna said is not part of the current proposal.

That puts the forthcoming proposed solution to our dilemma on human sexuality in a most precarious position, suggesting that one of three things is likely to happen to it:

1) If the proposal comes to General Conference 2019 as described with a proposal for regional funding of the bishops without an accompanying amendment to the Constitution, then somebody is going to ask the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision on its constitutionality, and the Judicial Council will almost certainly declare the proposal to be unconstitutional.

2) If the proposal includes in it a provision to amend the Constitution to make regional episcopal funding fit, then our polity requires that the proposal receive a two-thirds super majority for approval at General Conference and then again among all the members of the various UM annual conferences around the Methodist world. That’s a daunting task, since over the last 46 years, experience has been that the only human sexuality proposal that can receive the support of 2/3rds of the delegates to a UM General Conference is one that upholds the current restrictive standards of the Book of Discipline.

3) If the proposal comes forward with the provision to regionalize episcopal funding stripped out of it, then it is likely to founder on the Karen Oliveto effect. Bishop Oliveto is an openly gay woman married to her same sex partner, and there are significant numbers of United Methodists in many parts of the Church who will not accept her as a bishop of the whole Church, especially when the requirement remains that their contributions to the Episcopal Fund pay part of her financial support. For whatever it’s worth in this regard, the Western Jurisdiction, where Bishop Oliveto presides, does not now and has not for the last fifty years or so fully supported its own bishops.

I fully support the adoption of the One Church Model, but I don’t see a way past this three pronged pitchfork that confronts it at General Conference 2019. I hope you do and that you’ll let us know how you see that’s going to play out.