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I was invited by UM News Service to write a reflection on the 2019 General Conference. Here it is:

“What’s Next for our United Methodist Church?”

By Michael J. Coyner, retired UMC Bishop

Without overlooking the obvious pain and divisions that have arisen from the 2019 General Conference, it may be time to look ahead and to ask “What is next for our United Methodist Church?” We only have a little over a year until the regular General Conference in 2020, and in fact elections of delegates to that General Conference will happen this spring in our various Annual Conferences. I am no prophet in the sense of foreseeing the future, but some trends seem to raise obvious questions for us to consider:

1. The results of the 2019 Session were rather predictable since the delegates were mostly the very same delegates who served the 2016 General Conference. When the Judicial Council finishes reviewing the constitutionality of the Traditional Plan which passed, it is likely that the results will be that the “status quo” remains. While I understand that many hoped for different results in 2019, the reality is that only by electing different delegates will there be different results. So, will the delegations in 2020 consist of younger persons or persons more open to change? Or will Annual Conferences continue to elect the same persons who have served in the past?

2. The trend toward changing and modifying our denomination’s policies about same-gender weddings and ordination of LGBTQ persons is moving slowly but dramatically. In 1992 the General Conference considered the report of a commission it had established in 1988 to study the issue of homosexuality, and it rejected proposals for change by a vote of 710-238. That vote occurred at a time when the number of delegates from outside the United States was small. So the votes in 2019 of only 55% to retain our traditional language show a dramatic increase in the number of delegates who want to change or modify our stance - especially among US delegates. Some have estimated that about 2/3 of US delegates voted to modify our policies, and it was only the increasing number of delegates from outside the US which held the line on our traditional positions. So we will likely see two diverging trends: more delegates from outside of the US voting for traditional policies and more delegates from within the US voting for change. Which trend will prevail?

3. Approaching the 2019 General Conference we saw for the first time that “centrists” organized to try to influence voting. For the past 30 years or so it has only been those on the “left” and the “right” who have organized into caucus groups and tried to influence voting. Will the “center” of our UMC continue

to organize in the future? Since most of that group supported the One Church Plan, will they bring forth similar plans to the 2020 General Conference?

4. Although the results and proposals of the Commission on the Way Forward were not approved by the 2019 General Conference, our UMC has a history of voting “no” to many new ideas the first time, but then later adopting them. Will that prove to be the case with some or all of the proposals from the Commission?

5. Many have observed that the 2019 General Conference continued and even accelerated the lack of decorum, spreading of gossip and rumors, and uncivil behavior that has plagued recent General Conferences. Will that kind of behavior continue in 2020 and beyond, or have enough people been embarrassed by that kind of behavior (and the attention it gained in the national media) to move toward a more civil style of interaction in the future?

6. Will our United Methodist Church look for ways to organize itself to be a global church in the midst of a “flat” world? We are still trying to make our hierarchical and colonial structures from previous centuries work for us in a new world where most people (especially most younger people) demand immediate access and direct involvement in ministry and mission. Bishop Robert Schnase has described our current system as the “up and over” model of giving our money to a general church structure which then distributes our money for us. Many Annual Conferences and many local churches have found ways to establish their own partnerships for ministry and mission directly (in a “flat” way) which does not require our complicated general church structures. Will our UMC find ways to adapt to that growing trend?

7. Given how the speeches and statements at the 2019 General Conference reflected very different understandings of Scripture, will our UMC be able to bring some consensus to those understandings? One way to frame the difference is that many United Methodists view the Bible as the Word of God while many other United Methodists view Jesus Christ as the Word of God whom the Bible reveals. The former viewpoint tends toward idolatry of the Bible, while the latter tends toward relativism. Will our UMC find ways to bring those viewpoints together into a new consensus which honors Scripture by opening the Church to the movement of the Spirit?

8. A family systems therapist would likely diagnose our current preoccupation with the issue of homosexuality by saying we have made LGBTQ persons into our “identified patient” as a way of avoiding other issues like heterosexual abuse, polygamy, child neglect, racism, sexism, etc. Would hearing that diagnosis lead our UMC to have a healthy discussion of those larger and deeper issues? Would that discussion be a movement toward health?

9. Will the finances of our general church remain strong? In spite of the divisions and disruptions of recent years the giving of general church apportionments has remained quite strong, but will we now see a reduction of support? Apparently the GCFA (General Council on Finance and Administration) foresees problems because they are proposing a large reduction in the budget for the next quadrennium. Will that prove to be correct or just a self-fulfilling prophecy?

10. We all have mistyped “United” as “Untied” and that typo is the real question for our future. Will the UMC continue to be united or will it unravel? In order to remain united will we have to focus upon freedom within relationships, rather than uniformity within a Book of Discipline? Can we find ways to exhibit the biblical concept of the “unity of the Spirit within the bonds of peace” or will we remain stuck in the conflicts of a political convention model like the 2019 General Conference?

What is next for our United Methodist Church?