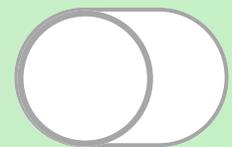


General Conference 2016

# The Love Alike Plan



A Fresh Approach to  
Achieving Amicable Unity in  
The United Methodist Church



# Overview...

Principled United Methodists have assumed variant positions relative to language in our *Book of Discipline* on homosexuality. Given the tipping point of public opinion that has been reached in American culture, tremendous pressure is placed upon the delegates of General Conference 2016 to chart a path forward for our denomination. Instances of disobedience to our current positions are rampant in some quarters. It has become apparent that we must live together under different rules if we are to live together at all.

Various sides in our human sexuality debate are coming to Portland to claim victory for their cause. But a win for one group might be the same as a loss for the church. If our language on human sexuality is overturned for the entire global church, a post-conference exodus is almost all but assured. If Traditionalists are successful in maintaining our standards and implementing new accountability measures, we begin a difficult road toward enforcement through judicial means (that is, clergy trials). Some moderate proposals have the potential to exacerbate our divisions by localizing them. The likely prospect of a stalemate at General Conference would mean another four years of dysfunction and distraction. None of these outcomes represent the fruitful future we want for our church.

This document is prepared to introduce a new legislative concept that offers a synthesis of early proposals such as “The Jurisdictional Solution”, Adam Hamilton’s “We Disagree” and “Local Option” proposals, the Connectional Table’s “Third Way”, and the “Covenantal Unity Plan.” The current language in our *Book of Discipline* related to human sexuality would remain the same, but annual conferences in the U.S. would be empowered to take a position of official dissent to these paragraphs. Doing so would require dissenting conferences to release to other conferences those clergy and churches with moral objection.

A way to accomplish this comprehensive structural solution without constitutional amendments was discovered a mere fifteen days before the start of General Conference 2016. Please prayerfully consider this proposal and share it with all delegates that will be gathering in Portland.

-Rev. Dr. Christopher M. Ritter, Clergy Delegate

Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without a doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.  
-J. Wesley

The following are some of the **KEY FEATURES** of the Love Alike Plan:

1. Once certain conditions are met, annual conferences in the U.S. will have the opportunity to vote official dissent to the *Book of Discipline*'s more contentious positions related to homosexuality. Congregations and clergy of officially dissenting conferences could ordain "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" and could celebrate same-sex weddings. They could also use their annual conference funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.
2. Dissenting conferences and their congregations would indicate their dissent from church teaching with a single identifying keyboard character after the name of their church or conference. This character is to be of a neutral nature and assigned by the General Council on Finance and Administration. For example, "Foundry United Methodist Church⊕" or "Pacific Northwest Annual Conference (D)".
3. Because every United Methodist congregation or clergy has the inherent right to be part of a conference that adheres to the *Book of Discipline*, those in a dissenting conference would have freedom to relate to another annual conference should they choose to do so. This is accomplished through an innovative but constitutional process hereafter described. The result is that dissenting conferences would be granted special liberties and, in exchange, would release those who accept the official position of the UMC on human sexuality.
4. To accomplish these liberties within the framework of our constitution, the boundaries of our U.S. jurisdictional and annual conferences would be changed by the appropriate bodies charged with this responsibility. The result is that all jurisdictions and annual conferences would be technically free to operate anywhere in the U.S. (while not required to do so).
5. Bishops, as General Superintendents of the church, would be required to meet the standards of the *Book of Discipline* in reference to their personal lifestyle.



Key Features

# BREAKTHROUGH APPROACH

An adequate solution for our church is a plan that would:

- Keep all United Methodists amicably in the church,
- Avoid creating violations of conscience,
- Do no harm to our growing global church,
- Avoid passing the sexuality hot-potato down to geographically defined annual conferences where conflicts might become exacerbated,
- Be implementable by General Conference without constitutional amendments and their requisite supermajority ratification votes.

There is an seldom-used article on our Constitution found in ¶141 that outlines a process for a local church to be transferred from one annual conference to another in which it is geographically located. This provision is separate from the process for moving annual conference boundaries. Our constitution acknowledges that overlapping borders may exist. The only instance in which this currently happens is with missionary conferences. If we make all jurisdictional and annual conference lines the same as the boundaries of the United States, we have created the fluidity in our system that would allow annual conferences to assume a position of dissent without forcing unwilling congregations and clergy to accept that stance.

No solution is better than genuine, heart-felt unity. But that is not where we seem to be. It is unlikely that we will get there without a comprehensive solution that allows certain liberties.

Though we  
cannot think  
alike, may we not  
love alike?  
-John Wesley



Send

# FIVE STEPS:

Five realistic steps must be taken by the General Conference, jurisdictional conferences, and U.S. annual conferences in order to enable this amicable unity plan.

1. General conference has the constitutional power to change the boundaries of the jurisdictional conferences upon the consent of the majority of the annual conferences of each of the jurisdictions involved (§139). For the purpose of this solution, General Conference 2016 would set the boundaries of EACH of our five jurisdictions identically as the boundaries of The United States of America. This means that all five jurisdictions would be national in scope and completely overlap. This does not require jurisdictions to operate everywhere in the U.S. It does empower them to do so. While super-majority ratification is not required, a majority of conferences in each jurisdiction would need to approve this by simple majority.
2. General Conference would allow annual conferences, under defined conditions, to vote non-compliance with our denominational position on homosexuality in §§ 304.3, 341.6, 161.F, 161.B, and 613. A 2/3 majority vote would be required as the necessary enabling legislation would also release congregations that will not dissent from the United Methodist positions listed. Under this new freedom, the clergy members of dissenting conferences shall not be chargeable under §2701 for being a self-avowed, practicing homosexuals, conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions, or for performing same-sex wedding ceremonies. The requirement of faithfulness in marriage under this paragraph would include same sex marriages recognized by the state.
3. Conservatives will likely only support this plan if it was passed along with elements of the Covenantal Unity Plan that would be in effect for non-dissenting conferences. These would restore order in non-dissenting conferences by establishing minimum sentences for conducting same-sex weddings, making complainants a necessary party to just resolution agreements, and moving episcopal accountability to the general church. Of



course, the minimum sentences would be moot for clergy of dissenting annual conferences.

4. Jurisdictional conferences have the constitutional power to determine the boundaries of their annual conferences (§27.4). For the purpose of this solution, each jurisdictional conference would set the boundaries of EACH of their annual conferences identically as the boundaries of The United States of America. This gives each of our U.S. annual conferences the authority (technically speaking) to operate anywhere in the United States. Effectively widening all jurisdictional and conference boundaries in the U.S. are important enabling steps to this solution. We will discuss the ramifications of this later in this document.
5. Annual conferences may adopt a pre-defined resolution that both dissents from the positions of the church related to human sexuality and grants the exit of any congregations that cannot, as a matter of conscience, do so. This must be passed by a 2/3 majority. Permission of bishops serving dissenting annual conferences would not be required for clergy to transfer to a non-dissenting conference.

## Summary of Five Implementation Steps:

1. General Conference approves new jurisdictional boundaries.
2. General Conference allows individual annual conferences to dissent from official UM positions on homosexuality.
3. New accountability measures are passed by General Conference to restore order and discipline to the church.
4. Jurisdictional conferences widen the borders of each of their annual conferences.
5. U.S. Annual conferences may vote to dissent from the *Discipline* on homosexuality, but they also must allow the transfer of congregations and clergy who cannot dissent.

# Open Borders!?

Opening conference borders has implications well beyond our sexuality debate. However, the only congregations that annual conferences would be serving beyond their traditional boundaries would be new church starts they might initiate and congregations they might vote to receive under ¶41. The following positive outcomes may be gained from allowing annual conferences to operate anywhere in the U.S. they might choose:

1. Annual conferences would be restyled as regional ministry networks rather than states in our United Methodist union. An annual conference is a group of churches served by a particular team of pastors, under the leadership of a bishop. Shared geography is one relevant component to success, but it is only one.
2. Our only current organizational response to decline is to merge one declining annual conference with another. This is a strategy that has yet to yield a turnaround. Economist Don House has predicted that the UMC will go from 57 to 17 annual conferences in the U.S. by 2050 under our present patterns of decline. We need a fresh, merit-based approach.
3. The presence of more than one conference operating in certain areas may allow us discover new ways of being effective.
4. Multisite congregations would be free to operate wherever they like without the complications that arise from crossing conference boundaries.
5. Some annual conferences might discover ways to use technology in order to do ministry over a wider area.
6. If another United Methodist conference can be effective in reaching people of a certain area, they are free to do so under this plan. We should collectively rejoice in this.
7. Conferences have the opportunity to specialize in certain types of ministry and recruit clergy accordingly.
8. We have areas of high population growth in the U.S. where the UMC is shrinking the fastest. It is time for other UM conferences to try new approaches in these locations.
9. Some congregations find themselves ideologically mismatched in their conference and this plan allows a means of correcting this. Think of progressive congregations in the Southeast or traditionalist congregations in the West.

# DRAFT LEGISLATION v. 3.0

## **Note on this legislative version:**

*Version 3.0 of this legislation is based on the strictest reading of ¶41 so as to stand the tightest possible scrutiny by Judicial Council. It assumes a reading of the paragraph that says transfers can only be considered by annual conferences from one conference to another specific conference and not granted in advance as in previous versions. This change lengthens the approval process by one year as names of non-dissenting churches must be gathered before the final vote to dissent is held.*

¶ 673. Dissenting Annual Conferences. In response to significant disagreement in our church related to human sexuality, the processes in this paragraph may be followed for annual conferences in the United States to take a position of dissent from certain official positions of The United Methodist Church.

1. Once the jurisdictional and conference boundary changes enabled by this paragraph are enacted, conferences choosing a position of dissent, their congregations, and their clergy shall not be held accountable to the italicized portions of the following United Methodist positions found elsewhere in our Discipline:

- a. *“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” (¶ 304.3).*
- b. *“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers*

# Legislation



and shall not be conducted in our churches.” (§ 341.6).

- c. “A bishop, clergy member of an annual conference, local pastor, clergy on honorable or administrative location, or diaconal minister may be tried when charged (subject to the statute of limitations in § 2702.4) with one or more of the following offenses: (a) immorality including but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not faithful in a *heterosexual* marriage; (b) practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings, including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies...” (§ 2702.1)
- d. “...Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, *heterosexual* marriage... *The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.*” (§ 161.F)
- e. “We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity *between a man and a woman. We believe that God’s blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.*” (§ 161.B)
- f. “The [conference council on finance and administration] shall have authority and responsibility to .... *ensure that no annual conference board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality or violate the expressed commitment of The UMC “not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends”* (§ 613)

2. As an enabling measure to the provisions of this paragraph, General Conference defines the boundaries of each of our several jurisdictional conferences to be the same as the boundaries of The United States of America. This change becomes effective upon certification of the consent required

in ¶16.12.

3. The following defines the processes by which U.S. annual conferences may be recognized as dissenting conferences under this paragraph:

- a. Before an annual conference shall become a dissenting conference, the following resolution must be passed by the jurisdictional conference to which the annual conference belongs: “The [name] Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church, does hereby set the boundaries of each of the several annual conferences in our jurisdiction as the full extent of our boundaries as established by General Conference.” Simple majority passage of this resolution shall suffice and these votes may be taken at the regularly scheduled jurisdictional conferences in 2016 so as to speed enactment of this paragraph.
- b. The respective cabinets of U.S. annual conferences or their designees may develop guidelines describing the effective operational limits of the geography of their annual conference. These parameters should be specific enough to serve as a guide to congregations studying transfer to another annual conference under ¶41. Annual conferences may express openness to creating new districts remote from their traditional place of ministry or serving as a temporary home for congregations while future annual conferences are being formed. These guidelines shall be presented to the regular annual conference session following General Conference 2016 for majority approval.
- c. Each annual conference in the U.S. shall vote their consent to the jurisdictional boundaries set by this paragraph at the next regularly called session following the 2016 General Conference session. Consent of a majority of annual conferences in the several jurisdictions shall be required in keeping with ¶16.12. The results of these votes shall be canvassed by the college of bishops of each jurisdictional conference.
- d. Annual conferences wishing to exercise the privileges of a dissenting conference shall accept the following resolution by a 2/3 majority vote: “Be it resolved that the [name] Annual Conference hereby intends to adopt a dissenting status to certain official positions of The United Methodist Church related to homosexuality as described in ¶673. We understand that this will require releasing congregations and clergy of our annual conference for whom this decision creates a violation of conscience.” Annual conferences who achieve passage of this resolution by 2/3 majority vote shall notify each clergy and congregation of this decision and communicate to them their rights under this paragraph. Passage of this resolution of intention shall be a required step for adopting a dissenting position.

e. Congregations of dissenting conferences shall have six months from the time of written notification to take the following steps:

- i. The church council or equivalent body may vote to explore membership in any U.S. conference that has not passed the above resolution. They may create a task force for the purpose of exploring annual conference options. Cabinets of the several U.S. annual conferences shall develop information to be made available to inquiring churches.
- ii. A church council or equivalent body making a recommendation on conference transfer shall secure a letter from the cabinet of a conference certifying that their church fits within the parameters adopted by the conference. Request may then be made for a charge conference called for the purpose of voting upon the transfer recommendation in keeping with ¶40.1.a. Other disciplinary paragraphs notwithstanding, the district superintendent of a congregation requesting transfer shall authorize and schedule on a timely basis a charge conference to consider the proposal. The vote on whether or not to approve the transfer recommended shall be taken by secret ballot and the results announced to the congregation as soon as possible, and not longer than ten days from the time of the vote.
- iii. A church whose charge conference has requested transfer from a dissenting conference may afterward schedule the congregational meeting described in ¶41.1b, to be held under the following rubric:
  - i) The congregational meeting shall be held at a time and place fixed by the church council or equivalent body.
  - ii) Notice of the time, place, and purpose of the meeting shall be given at least ten days in advance by two or more of the following (except as local laws may otherwise provide): from the pulpit of the church, in its weekly bulletin, in a local church publication, or by mail.
  - iii) The church council or equivalent body shall designate both a chair for the congregational meeting and a secretary. The secretary shall send minutes of the congregational meeting to the church council, district superintendent, and cabinet of both conferences.
  - iv) A vote shall be taken by secret ballot of all professing members present at the congregational meeting. A 2/3 majority vote shall be required. The result

of the vote should be announced as soon as is practical and not more than ten days following the vote.

v) Representatives of the annual conference to whom the congregation is considering transfer may be present at the congregational meeting. Any clergy appointed to the church may attend this meeting and these clergy shall not interfere with the right of the congregation to hold the meeting.

f. The cabinet of each annual conference that has voted their intention to dissent shall compile a complete listing of congregations that have voted to transfer to another conference under the provisions of this paragraph, along with the name of the conference to which each as voted to transfer. These names shall be added to the following annual conference resolution that grants final dissenting status to the conference: "We the [name] Conference of The United Methodist Church do hereby vote dissent to certain official positions of the church on homosexuality as described in ¶673 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church. To enable this dissenting status, we approve the transfer of the following congregations from our annual conference to the annual conference(s) listed: [a complete list of congregations that have completed the approvals for transfer listed in 673.3e shall be inserted here along with the name of the conference to which each has voted transfer]." Upon 2/3 majority passage of this resolution, the liberties of a dissenting conference described in this paragraph shall be in effect on the January 1 following this vote.

g. The transfer of congregations from dissenting conferences shall be final upon completion of the steps outlined in ¶367.3,a-f and upon a 2/3 vote of the annual conference to which the congregation seeks transfer.

#### 4. Other provisions:

a. Dissenting annual conferences and their congregations are to place a single distinguishing keyboard character after their name on church letterhead and signage. This character will be assigned by GCFA and is to be neutral in design, so as to elicit neither shame nor pride. The symbol should not directly reference human sexuality.

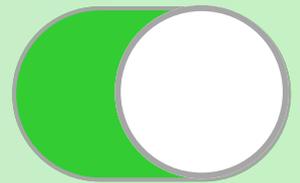
b. Non-dissenting conferences are strongly encouraged to cooperate with congregations and clergy who express a desire to join a dissenting conference. These transfers will occur under the authority of ¶39 and ¶347.

c. Conferences and their cabinets are encouraged to assume a loving, non-punitive posture toward these churches and pastors who pursue transfer to another conference under this

paragraph. Stability of pastoral appointment for up to 36 months after notification is encouraged through the transition process.

- d. The provisions of ¶347 notwithstanding, clergy shall have the right to transfer from dissenting conferences when they express in writing a moral objection to the dissenting status of the conference to their supervising bishop.
- e. General church resources shall not be used to develop customized rites and resources for use by dissenting conferences and congregations. Dissenting conferences are expected to work together on developing these resources and share any costs involved. If all annual conferences in a jurisdiction assume a dissenting position under this paragraph, resources of the jurisdiction may be used to develop rites and resources for their dissenting congregations and clergy that reflect their dissenting position.
- f. After the change in boundaries enabled by this paragraph are enacted, annual conferences may vote to transfer to any jurisdictional conference upon recommendation of their most recent jurisdictional delegation and upon a 2/3 majority vote. The final votes shall be held at least eighteen months before the start of the next regularly scheduled jurisdictional conference. Annual conference secretaries must notify the college of bishops of both jurisdictions involved and GCFA within ten days of the vote. The transfer will become effective on September 1 of the year of a regularly scheduled jurisdictional conference. A conference that has transferred to a new jurisdiction must stay in that jurisdiction for at least eight years unless it is dissolved by General Conference action.

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