The Welcoming Table Q&A

We have received dozens of comments and questions on the “Welcoming Table” vision from North Georgia United Methodists. The vision guide and webinars are intended as the start of a conversation, and the feedback is important and appreciated.
Below are a few of those questions and answers.

WHY NOW?

Why is this vision being shared now?

There are a number of reasons for discerning and sharing this vision now. We are early in a new quadrennium in our denomination. We are beginning to emerge from a pandemic. But there are two primary reasons.

First, there are people across our communities in ever rising numbers who do not know the love of Christ and do not know that there is a table where they are welcome and will feel loved and valued.

The second reason is that there are splinter groups reaching out to United Methodist churches encouraging them to split away from the church. These splinter groups are sharing misinformation and it is time for the bishop and cabinet to speak into this.

What is the trend of membership in the US United Methodist Church?

The trend of membership in the UMC is troubling. In the 1960s, there were more than 11 million members. Today there are approximately 6 million. It is anticipated that by 2025 membership will fall below 6 million.

Keep in mind, this decline is occurring as the US population is growing.

Clearly, we must come to terms with this crisis.

What is Church membership today of those under 40 compared to recent decades?

According to a recent Pew Research Study, the age distribution of membership in the UMC is: 18-29 - 9%, 30-49 - 29%, 50-64 - 30%, 65+ - 32%.

Overall, less than 50% of millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, consider themselves Christian. Only 1 in 3 millennials attend church services once or twice a month.

Those are startling statistics that should alarm every Christian.
**GENERAL CONFERENCE**

**When is the next General Conference?**

The postponed 2020 General Conference is scheduled for fall of 2022. We should also prepare that there is a chance we cannot meet, even then, depending on global vaccination rates and travel restrictions. The timing of the General Conference is set by the Commission on General Conference. We will share updates on General Conference as they’re available at ngumc.org/GC2020.

**Will you uphold the Book of Discipline?**

Yes. We are currently operating under the 2016/2019 *Book of Discipline* and will until another session of General Conference.

**We know we are not of one mind on many things, but what are our “essentials” as United Methodists?**

The Articles of Religion in our *Book of Discipline* are unchanging. They are our foundation. They cannot be amended by the General Conference. This is what we believe as United Methodists. Read the Articles of Religion in the *Book of Discipline* or at www.umc.org/en/content/articles-of-religion.

**Do you support The Protocol?**

Yes. We support the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace and our vision for The United Methodist Church going forward is in alignment with the Protocol. We also acknowledge that the Protocol will likely be amended.

**Is The United Methodist Church in chaos?**

No. The United Methodist Church is methodical. It’s run in a methodical manner. There is not widespread chaos or widespread disobedience to the Book of Discipline.

**WHAT NOW?**

**What should I do with the “Welcoming Table” document?**

This is an evangelistic document. Use it in your context. Who in your community is not at the table? Who needs to know they are valued?

**What is the concept of the “Welcoming Table”?**

In John 17:22, Jesus spends his last moments with his disciples gathered around a table praying for unity: “The glory you (the Father) have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have
loved me.” Jesus’ final word to them is that the world will come to know God’s love through their uniting love for one another.

Jesus’ call is to bring others to God’s table, where they will be exposed to the healing love and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The love found at the table will equip the to love one another, and compel them to invite, without exception, every single human being to that table.

Can you share resources to help congregations have difficult conversations?
- The North Georgia Conference produced a six-week conversation guide based on the teachings of Rev. Dr. Gary Mason whose work has included guiding individuals and communities to find healing and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.
- Discipleship Ministries offers resources through Courageous Conversations. These tools help your congregation structure dialogues for learning instead of debating.

Can you share the resources mentioned in the Webinar?
- “Who Do We Choose to Be?” by Margaret Wheatley
- “The Righteous Mind” by Jonathon Haight

POLITICS AND THE UMC

What role, if any, does political ideology have in The United Methodist Church?

Most of the members of our church have opinions on political issues. Often our faith influences our political beliefs. But you cannot be too progressive, too conservative, or too moderate to be a United Methodist Christian. There is a place for all of us at the table. Here in Georgia many times political rivals are both active and faithful United Methodists.

Are there examples of past social issues that have divided The United Methodist Church?

The church has debated and been divided on the ordination of women, acceptance of interracial marriage, gun control, the ordination of divorced people, and much more.

The UMC is a church that is constantly renewing our covenant to be united in the Body of Christ, without compromising our integrity and respecting the diversity of spiritual and faithful experiences of each country, culture, and community. This is inherently Wesleyan. We claim and embrace that with God’s help we are moving on to perfection in love.

Has the Methodist Church ever split?

In 1844 the Methodist Church tragically split along Northern and Southern lines. It is a scar on our history that is still healing. One step toward healing came in the creation of The United Methodist Church in 1968 and the elimination of the segregated Central Jurisdiction. This year marks 50 years since the Black “Georgia Conference” and the White “North Georgia Conference” merged.
SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

How can we disagree on matters of human sexuality? Scripture seems clear.

Bishop Sue regularly receives questions asking for help in understanding how United Methodists can feel so differently on the topic of human sexuality. She offers a reflection from Rev. Dr. Dan Johnson, a retired pastor and former chair of the board of trustees of Asbury Seminary. He wrote the reflection linked below to Trinity UMC in Gainesville, Florida, following the 2016 General Conference. Read it here. You do not have to change your mind on this topic to be United Methodist.

LEARNING MORE

Where can I learn more and follow along with the “Welcoming Table” conversation?

You are invited to gather “At the Table” with Bishop Sue and others across our conference and denomination for prayer and conversation as an extended community of faith on the North Georgia Conference Facebook page Monday nights at 6:30 p.m.

We will also share resources and information at ngumc.org/WelcomingTable.