

# Conversation on Conference Committee Structure: Survey Results and Proposal

Below is a transcript of a conversation between Nate Abrams (Board of Discipleship and Advocacy), Rev. Cassie Rapko (Board of Church and Society Rep), Rev. Brian Tillman (Conference Committee on Religion and Race), and Rev. Dr. Steven Usry (Board of Church Development). Find the video at [www.ngumc.org/committeestructure](http://www.ngumc.org/committeestructure).

They share results from a recent survey on our Conference committee structure and discuss how your insight and feedback informed the proposed committee restructure that will be presented to the 2021 Annual Conference.

## TRANSCRIPT

Nate Abrams:

Welcome laity and clergy of the North Georgia Annual Conference. We greet you in the name of Jesus Christ and on behalf of North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. We're here today to talk about some proposed changes to the organizational structure of our North Georgia Conference, to give you some history and information on the proposed change, and to address some of the feedback that many of you sent us regarding the proposal.

My name is Nate Abrams, and I am the chair of the board of discipleship and advocacy. With me are the reverends Cassie Rapko, Brian Tillman, and Steven Usry, who are all leaders in our annual conference. I'm glad that they've joined us today. Cassie serves as the conference representative for the general board of church and society. Brian is the chair of the conference commission on religion and race and Steven is the chair of the board of congregational development.

Nate Abrams:

So as we start our video today, I'm going to give a short introduction to let you know how we arrived here. And then we'll go into our conversation with the leaders that we have assembled here. Now, one word here, I want you to know that this video is likely to be a little longer than most videos that the conference puts out, but the information that we're going to be discussing here is really important, and it will be worth your taking the time to listen. We hope that you'll stick with us and then after the video is done, that you will share it with other laity and clergy throughout the conference. So, to start us off, I'll give a brief history of how we get to this point.

Nate Abrams:

First, by the vote of the annual conference in 2020, a new committee known as the Barnes Evaluation and Administrative Team, or BEAT, for short was launched. That vote of the conference represented a historic shift in how ministry is funded by setting up a mechanism to pull the funds generated through the sale of close church properties.

Nate Abrams:

Now, this allows the conference to do a couple of things. The first thing is it allows for a centralized funds distribution, which makes ministry grants accessible to all North Georgia Conference churches and groups. Secondly, the formation of the BEAT team also represents a deepening commitment to the idea that the successes and effectiveness of each individual church in the North

Georgia Conference increases the success and effectiveness of *all* churches in the North Georgia Conference.

Nate Abrams:

Shortly after Annual Conference last year, Rev. Hal Jones, who has served as the director of connectional ministries, began initial conversations with Steven, myself, and our Bishop about various groups in our North Georgia Conference structure and their roles. These conversations were especially relevant, given the launch of the new Barnes Fund. As part of these conversations, we noted that there was a growing awareness of intersecting missions and similar charges among various groups.

Nate Abrams:

Some of these groups are linked to the board of discipleship and advocacy, some are linked to the board of congregational development, but there were also several that currently weren't well linked anywhere. We discussed concerns and anecdotal reports about confusion and lack of understanding or confidence, even in the conference structure, particularly regarding how grant monies were awarded, which groups were awarding them and by what criteria those grants were being awarded. We talked about the opportunity to build on the momentum, generated with the launch of the new Barnes Fund and the centralization of funds distribution. We discussed opportunities for greater communication and collaboration across all of our North Georgia Conference Groups, opportunities that lead to greater effectiveness in supporting churches, laity and clergy, as they minister to their communities and continue to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of our world.

Nate Abrams:

And finally, we recognize that this is an opportunity to reaffirm the purpose of our North Georgia Conference structure, which is to serve churches, laity, and clergy, as they serve and minister to their individual community. But we also didn't want to have these conversations and make these plans in isolation. We wanted to invite feedback about the conversation that we had begun. And so one of our first steps we took was to send out a conference wide communication to our North Georgia laity and clergy.

Nate Abrams:

We did that about a month ago and included a survey about our current structure and the values reshaping it. Today, we're going to share the results of that survey with you. We're going to talk about what we learned from you, and we'll present a proposal for what we believe will reflect an improved in more effective North Georgia Conference. And lastly, we'll invite you to offer feedback once again about everything that we presented today.

Nate Abrams:

Now to the survey results. First off I wanted to thank all of you who completed the survey. We had 140 responses and for those of you who did not see it, here are the questions that we asked. The first question was simply a choice between whether or not the respondent was lay or clergy. 35% of response were laity and 64% were clergy. The second question asked whether or not the respondent understood how the work of our North Georgia Conference committees boards, commissions, and advocacy teams helps and supports the local church and its ministry. Overall, 73% responded that they were clear about how most of our boards and committees support the

work of the local church, roughly 27% were unsure of how boards and committee support the work of the local church.

Nate Abrams:

Question three, listed the following aspirational values and ask whether the respondent felt that those values were complete and good. The values that we listed were transparency, inclusion and diversity access and engagement, clarity about structure, clarity about the role and mission of each group in our conference structure, clarity about how each group's role in mission is carried out and clarity about the role of conference staff in serving and supporting laity and clergy members of the Annual Conference. We'll dive deeper into question three in a few moments, but for right now I'll note that overall, 77% of respondents noted that the values listed were good and complete. 23% responded, no. And in the survey, we provided space for respondents to give their thoughts on the listed values.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

Nate Abrams:

So on to our conversation about the survey results. And these questions are for our leaders that are here with me.

So first question I want to ask is, how do you all interpret the fact that only 140 people completed the survey? What do you make of that? What thoughts or questions does that raise for you?

Cassie Rapko:

Thanks, Nate. So I think that there are a lot of factors that led to only having 140 people complete the survey. One of them, if we're just honest is just time. Folks are busy. Life for the last year, it's especially been hard as we all know, and folks are just not looking to add one more thing. But I think more directly, this points to the issues that we are currently trying to address: how do folks in our congregations or in our conference get their information? Where do they go for news and resources? How do we get the word out about things? Our conference communications office does an amazing job. We are very blessed to have Sybil on our team, but the fact that we only had 140 people out of 340,000 United Methodists in our conference fill out the survey, I think it speaks to the ways that we want to be more intentional and direct about how we work together, how we get information out, what resources are available, and really the ministries that we're doing all throughout the conference and across the conference boards and committees.

Nate Abrams:

Thank you, Cassie. Next question. Almost 35% of laity respondents indicated that they were unclear about how most or all the work of our North Georgia Conference committees and boards and commissions help. They were unclear about how those entities help their local churches and ministries. What do you all make of that? And do you think it's representative of all North Georgia Conference laity? And the last part of this question, what opportunities do you think there are that are being offered for improvement?

Brian Tillman:

Sure. Thanks Nate for that question. I appreciate the honesty of the 35% and would imagine that an even greater percentage of laity in the conference feel like that 35%. From my view, most of the

laity in our churches know little to nothing about the annual conference. I've been connected by membership or by being a pastor at five different churches in North Georgia.

Brian Tillman:

And in that experience, there may only be 35% of the members of those churches who know what's going on in their own church ministries. And so that's probably going to be true as well for our annual conference. I think churches in the conference can do more to show people what the church's mission is and how we are working towards that goal. I think all of our churches and the conference can do better if we show people the impact of the work that we're doing more and I think that will help them go a long way.

Nate Abrams:

Thank you, Brian. Next question. So 22% of the clergy respondents also answered that they were unclear about how most or all of the work about North Georgia Conference committees and boards impacts their local church. Do you think that's representative of all the North Georgia clergy and what opportunities do you think that we have for improvement?

Steven Usry:

Nate, I'll take this one. I think that one of the gifts of this survey was that we heard from folks and we heard that we need greater clarity. And I think there were a few more clergy who seemed like they were confident in what they knew about our structures, but I personally think that those numbers are actually an under-representation of our clergy. I think that we've got to do a better job at being able to communicate why all the different communities and agencies and groups exist throughout our conference. So for me, the opportunity is two fold. We've been talking about getting laser focused on describing each of these ministry groups right here on this call, each of us represent one of these groups and I don't think we've ever created a one sentence definition of what these different groups do.

Steven Usry:

And so we're talking about that. How can we describe our teams better? And then secondly, how can we continue to increase the consistency of every communication about these groups throughout the course of a year? These groups exist to support and enhance the vitality of each local church. So it's vital that the people of North Georgia, the clergy and the laity, know what these groups are about, know why they exist, know how they can help them.

Nate Abrams:

Thanks, Steven. So 77% of laity respondents and 62% of clergy respondents indicated that they were unclear about how most or all of our committees award monetary grants. They're unclear about the criteria used for awarding those grants and just the general processes of how grants are awarded. Does any of that surprise you? And how do you think the launch of the new Barnes Fund team will help address those issues?

Steven Usry:

It doesn't surprise me at all. I know when I first came in as a clergy person, learning all the different agencies and the places where money could be received for grant funding, I was as confused as anybody. It takes a long while to figure that out, but let me say this. There's a reason, and the reason I think there's been so much confusion in the past is because we had so many various funding

sources, they were scattered in different places. And I think you didn't know where money could be received if you had an idea for something to reach your community. But I will say that it was a landmark moment, this past year, when the annual conference voted to pull the funds together for the maximization of ministry and they developed BEAT to address this. All of a sudden you have what was a bunch of different agencies and a lot of different sources, now found in one place.

Steven Usry:

And so I think the uniformity of this is going to reduce confusion. And let me just be very clear, the development of the Barnes Fund into one source to grant funds for ministry, and then a team that oversees it. That clarifies who you can go to, right? It's not a bunch of groups anymore. It's one group that you can go to. It clarifies the path. We will soon have released all of our information on applications for grants. So everybody's got the same resource to be able to apply for grants. And then we've also released the criteria. So even going into developing or writing your grant application, you can know how it will be measured. I think it's a huge gift. I think it's going to bless ministry.

Nate Abrams:

So for those of you watching, one of the things I neglected to mention at the beginning of this video is that Rev. Dr. Stephen Usry is also the chair of that Barnes Fund committee. So he has a wealth of insight and knowledge into how these funding sources are starting to come together. All right. So I mentioned that we were going to get back to question three, the one that talked about values.

I'm going to provide you with just a summary of all the respondents. We had quite a number of written-in responses to that question and to read all of those would take quite a while. When we went through the responses, we noted that they fell into several general categories. The first thing was that there was a strong desire for accountability among all the conference boards, committees and groups. Comments suggested wanting to make sure that these groups that are charged with doing the work of ministry in the North Georgia Conference are accountable to someone, and are accountable for the work that they're doing.

Nate Abrams:

The second thing was that there was also a strong desire for a clear purpose and a clarity of processes among the groups. As Steven mentioned a moment ago, the processes for getting grant funding were unclear. So there's a real desire for clarity, so that folks know what these groups do. Thirdly, respondents wanted a clear definition of diversity and inclusion. They wanted to know what it means to have a diverse or inclusive board of committee. So that's something to really look into to make sure that when we say diversity and inclusion, we are clear about what that means.

Nate Abrams:

Respondents talked about, making sure that conference support was equitable. They want to make sure that congregations and districts that already have ample resources, don't continue to receive more and more at the expense of those who might be struggling. And the last big thing that emerged from the responses was a reinforcement of the idea that the conference, along with all of its boards, committees, agencies, and groups, exist to support and resource the work and ministry of the local church. I don't think that that one can be overstated. The conference and everything about it exists so that to support what the local church does in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Nate Abrams:

Now, going through that, I want to be really clear, all of the responses that we got were not affirming. We get some responses that were definitely not through rose colored glasses. We got some good criticism in the responses. In fact, one respondent noted that, "Three men leading this initial phase works against the inclusion dynamic being proposed," that's a direct quote. I want to say to whomever said that, thank you. Your feedback was one of the reasons that Cassie was invited to be a part of this dialogue and planning. Also, one of the reasons that Brian was brought in. It revealed a blind spot for us.

Nate Abrams:

And it also revealed something a little bit larger. The fact that for so long, it's been men who have been elected to many of the key leadership roles in our conference structure. I just want to say, and I think I say this on behalf of everyone on this video, thank you for making us better with your feedback. That was really important and we heard you. So we're going to talk a little bit about some of the other feedback that we got as well. One other respondents said that, "you can have clarity and have a terrible structure." And this is for anyone to answer here. What's been your experience working in our current structure?

Cassie Rapko:

I'll take that one, Nate. Whoever asked this is absolutely right. You can have clarity and a terrible structure. You can have no clarity and a great structure, but unless both are working together, it's really hard to follow along with it. But I do think it's important to acknowledge and affirm that we have really good and really effective ministry that our current structure has supported. When you look at all of the different things that our conference does, it's truly remarkable. The reach that we have, not just in North Georgia, but across the Southeast, across the country and throughout the entire world. I think particularly about organizations like that Brian leads with our Commission on Religion and Race. I think also about our disaster relief ministry. We have such a phenomenal disaster response in our conference. That ministry is amazing.

Cassie Rapko:

I also think about our ministry with children, our ministry with youth, there are just so many amazing things that we do, but I also think that sometimes, because we have such great ministries, we find that we're not really talking to each other about those ministries. And what happens is we end up working in silos. And so you don't know what the next person is actually doing. And what happens is we reinvent the wheel over and over again because we're not collaborating in ways that we really should. We are a connectional system and in the connectional system, one of the values of that is that we don't have to reinvent the wheel every single time that we can work together.

Cassie Rapko:

And so, I think one of the reasons why we're looking at the structure of our committees in the conference is because continuous improvement is always something that we want to strive for. Even in structures that are effective and working, we can always improve them. And so while we have great organizations that are doing amazing things, we can always be better and we can always strive to be better. And so I'm that we're looking at that so that we can continue doing amazing ministry in this part of the world.

Nate Abrams:

Thanks Cassie. Next one, one of the respondents suggested that the values appear to be aspirational values and not lived values. What are you all's thoughts on that?

Cassie Rapko:

I'm going to take that one too, if that's all right.

Nate Abrams:

That's fine.

Cassie Rapko:

So going toward that, always looking for improvement. When I saw this response, the first thing that came to my mind, because I am a theological nerd, is sanctifying grace. The grace that we received from God as we continue through our faith as we learn, as we strive to get closer and closer to perfect love of God and perfect love of neighbor. Now I will admit there are days that I am striving harder than others to get to that perfect love of God and neighbor. And so when I think about it being aspirational sometimes, yeah, sometimes it's completely aspirational. But I think that we have to be able to aspire toward those goals and those values so that we have something to aim for. And so we are trying to live out those values and each day we get a little bit closer, just like we do through sanctifying grace.

Nate Abrams:

Thanks Cassie. One of the respondents said, why should we have a set of values at this level, rather than at the UMC and conference levels at a whole. What are your thoughts about that? Would you like to see us address and clarify our vision and values at the conference level or at some other level?

Steven Usry:

Let me handle that one, Nate, if it's okay. Because when I read that comment, my first thought was yes and amen. You know there's a power in team thinking and we want to have 140 people reply to us and give us these ideas. But I just got to tell you that, the whole pause here to look at our systems and how we got our structures and ask, are they really serving us the best way? Is really at the heart of what this person had to say. We want every one of our teams, our committees, our agencies, to all be aligned under the same values and the same vision for us as an annual conference. And so let me share a couple of thoughts around that.

We've been talking about the revitalization of the Common Table, and I realize for some people that language, that syntax, "The Common Table" might be new, but there was a time in this annual conference that the Common Table was a group of leaders of every different agency in our conference. They got together and they collaborated.

Steven Usry:

So like Cassie was talking about, they weren't working in silos. They were doing strategic planning and vision creation, ideation and refinement. They were thinking about how together each one of their parts worked as part of the body of Christ. And so this is very, very important. And one of the things we're hoping out of this conference restructure is that the Common Table will become a powerful source of our unification around values and around vision.

Steven Usry:

And specifically here's what we're dreaming. We wondered if one of the tasks of the Common Table wouldn't have possibly be to set a craft of value set for the annual conference that informs everything that we do at every level. And then secondly, wouldn't it be great to have one agency that was in charge to make sure that all of our groups were aligned and to make sure that we were communicating for the greater good of our connected good. I'm very excited about the Common Table. And I think if it can be a high functioning team, it will bless every other agency, committee, and group and our local churches.

Nate Abrams:

Awesome. Thank you, Steven. One of our respondents said that they think very few people in our churches had any idea about the scope, magnitude or impact of all these various agencies, commissions, committees, et cetera. Do you agree? And if so, what are your thoughts about how that can be addressed?

Brian Tillman:

Yeah. Actually, I do agree with this respondent. Part of that is because we have so many agencies, commissions, and committees. Now I want to be clear, not knowing everything about what we do is not necessarily a bad thing. We do a lot. If everyone can tell us everything that we're doing, we're probably not doing enough, we're doing too little. But we can do a better job of sharing some of the impact of our work. It's not bragging, is actually a way of holding ourselves accountable. We are showing folks what we did with the resources they've invested.

Nate Abrams:

Thank you, Brian. Another quote from one of the respondents. They said "you don't provide space for us here, presumably because you want your list to be affirm and not challenged." This is one of those criticisms that I've mentioned earlier that we got. So do we want to be challenged? And are we serious about inviting and listening to feedback?

Brian Tillman:

I want to thank this respondent, whoever you are. I appreciate your honesty. I have often felt the way that you do. As a person of color, I have experienced challenges with being heard in settings where the dominant culture is in control and works overtime it seems to silence the voices of the marginalized. Every system has a power group. Many times those power groups work to silence the voices that are subversive and contrary to the dominant thought. So this is a valid challenge.

Brian Tillman:

What's different here is that this process we are undertaking was begun at a table where many marginalized groups were invited to the table and were seated with full ability to speak truthfully, and to impact positive changes. So to answer the question, yes, we want to be challenged to be open and honest. We want to invite input and we'll listen to the feedback. We also want to be held accountable so that if something doesn't land well or it doesn't work to open up access, we can go back to the table with those negatively impacted and come up with something more just, more loving, more grace giving, and more holy.

Nate Abrams:

Thank you, Brian. Last question in this section. Were there any other comments that were offered as feedback through the survey that you have thoughts on before we talk about proposal for our new structure?

Steven Usry:

I will share. We probably don't have time to talk about the quality of the feedback, honestly, because we heard people really cry out to make sure every one of our agencies and committees are accountable. We heard comments around equality and justice, and sometimes what may seem like the most simple of feedback, I'll tell you, it was very important, it was clarion to me. And I'll give you an example. One of the folks that said this, they said, "Always, always make sure that the clear end goal and reason to exist for every group is to support the local congregations, that's where disciples are made." That's right on. And so, yeah, we just had some phenomenal hearts and minds sharing with us and so we really appreciate all the feedback.

## **PROPOSED STRUCTURE CHANGE**

Nate Abrams:

Yeah. Thank you. So now we're going to turn from the survey responses and talk a bit about the proposed structural changes to the annual conference. What can you all tell us about the aim and the concept shaping the proposed new structure?

Brian Tillman:

Yeah. So for one, our conference structure exists to support laity and clergy in our North Georgia Conference churches, as they engage in ministries to and with the communities they serve. Laity and clergy in our North Georgia Conference are "the customers" of our conference structure.

Cassie Rapko:

And also, there is an opportunity to deepen collaboration and coordination among the wide variety of various groups within our structure.

Steven Usry:

And I would say Nate, if we could go back to the Barnes team, the BEAT team, and the Barnes Fund for a minute. With that conference approval with that new funds distribution in place centralized by one committee. And by the way, the conference nominations team put together a rich and diverse team of people to oversee that grant funding for churches and communities. I just think it's a huge win and it means that there's going to be equal access to funds throughout the annual conference and that's a game changer.

Nate Abrams:

Awesome. Thank you. So those were the concepts and the aims that went into this proposed structure. What can you all tell us about the specifics of those changes?

Brian Tillman:

Sure. As we've mentioned already, all grants will be received by and awarded through the new Barnes team, the BEAT team. Already launched and supported by groups, currently distributing

money and grants. This offers a single clear and transparent mechanism accessible to all North Georgia churches and groups for receiving and considering grant requests and then distributing funds in support of innovative, new and expanding ministries. The Barnes team is made up of a group of individuals who are lay, clergy, from small churches, big churches, who are racially inclusive and are committed to being good stewards to all the resources of the annual conference, is not their money. It's your money that has been entrusted to this group to help us reach the mission field for Jesus. There are many people that are underrepresented in our church and we want to reach them. This is one way we are committed to doing so, and we will continue to evaluate ways to improve when we are not successful.

Cassie Rapko:

Another way. Another specific of the proposed changes is to combine the board of discipleship and advocacy and the board of congregational development into one group working collaboratively and co-led by a lay and a clergy person so that we can have true partnership in that way. And so what this would do. Is it would offer increased communication, increased collaboration and coordination among the members of the advocacy groups associated with each group. It would enhance the ministries and services and the support provided by all members of these different groups. It would also optimize coordination with the new Barnes team, the BEAT team in providing a full array of resources, both financial resources and human resources in support of innovative ministries to these communities served by North Georgia Conference churches, laity and clergy. Also, members of the new combined group would be represented on each district strategic growth team, so that all districts have those resources as well. And what this would do is further deepen the communication and collaboration between and among conference wide committees and the district strategic growth teams as well.

Steven Usry:

And Nate, I mentioned earlier, the revitalization and the convening again of the Common Table. This can provide for us a venue of representatives from all North Georgia Conference groups in a new structure that we'll be able to engage in vision and strategic planning, supporting the collective mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And I just want to submit to you, and I think every one of us knows this, right? Our structures must serve the spirit of who we are.

Steven Usry:

I think of structure almost like my bones, they're to serve my spirit, right? And I think over time, all structures must be examined and refined. And so I'm glad we're doing this. I think, I would submit to you the Common Table, may be the most important part of this initiative, because we have a group that will be collectively together from every different group. They're going to be doing vision work, vision implementation and refinement, alignment of purpose, strategic planning. And our dream is if this can be a high functioning team, it will be a tremendous asset to the work we do here in North Georgia.

Nate Abrams:

Thank you, Stephen. That brings us to the end of our time together. First, I want to thank Cassie, Brian, and Steven for putting in the time over these past few months to work through this, to look through the survey results, and to plan and to dream about what our North Georgia Conference can be. This video, as well as a transcript of it, can be accessed via the conference webpage. That web address is in [NGUMC.org/committeestructure](http://NGUMC.org/committeestructure). We invite you to offer more feedback by submitting

your thoughts, your questions, your ideas, and your criticisms as well about all that we've presented and talked about in this video. And again, the link for that new survey when it is available will also be at that [NGUMC.org/committeestructure](http://NGUMC.org/committeestructure) website.

Nate Abrams:

So for next steps, once we received your feedback, we will share it, through another conference communication that will be coming out in the coming weeks. We will work your feedback into the proposal for restructuring that will be presented during the annual conference for a vote. So those are our next big steps.

Nate Abrams:

Finally, I want to, for myself and on behalf of our whole team here, thank all of you who have already helped. I want to thank all of you who will help, who have given us feedback and who have offered thoughts and ideas as we're going through this planning and ideation of what our structure can be.

For those of you who have already submitted feedback, again, thank you for your honest responses. They had been helpful. A few of them have stung, but we honor that stinging. When we feel that, we know when we're off the path and we need to pay a little more attention. So thank you for that. You all have been so very helpful to our conversation planning, and we look forward to getting to hear the next round of feedback from you as we work together to create a stronger, a more missional, and a more faithful North Georgia Conference. Thank you everyone for watching this video and once again, we look forward to hearing from you again.