

# Frequently Asked Questions about United Methodist Polity

As of Nov. 18, 2019

## General Questions About the United Methodist Church Structure

### What is United Methodist polity?

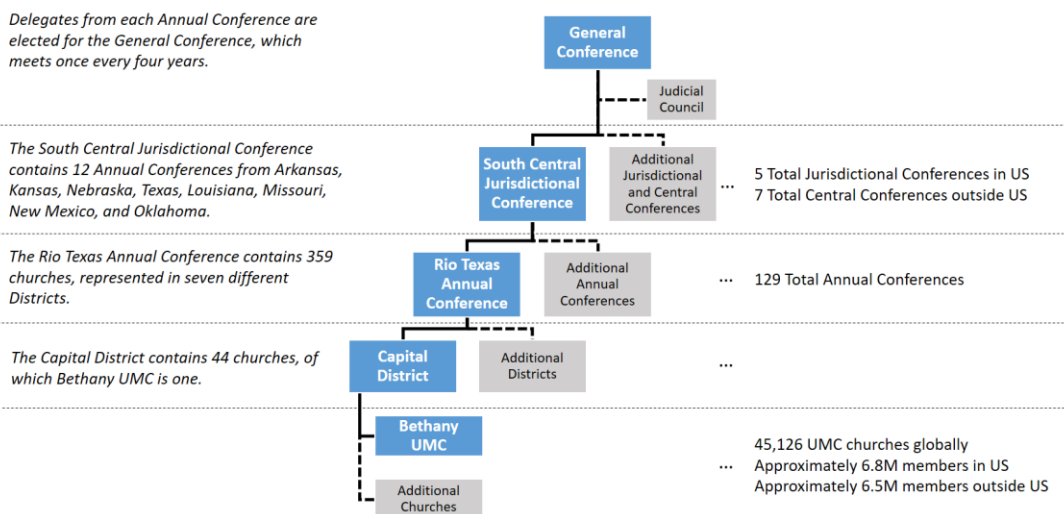
Polity refers to the operational and governance structure of the church, including not just a local church, but also the larger global church structure.

### How is the United Methodist Church structured and where does Bethany UMC fit within that structure?

The United Methodist Church is composed of many local churches, which are then organized into Districts, then into Annual Conferences, then into Jurisdictional Conferences and finally into the General Conference of the United Methodist Church. As an analogy, consider that cities are grouped into counties, which are grouped into states, which are grouped into countries, which are grouped into continents.

Bethany is in the Capital District of the Rio Texas Annual Conference. The Rio Texas Annual Conference is part of the South Central US Jurisdictional Conference, which is made up of the Annual Conferences in the following states: Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. See Figure 1. below to better understand how Bethany UMC fits within the overall structure of the global United Methodist Church.

Figure 1. The UMC Structure and How Bethany UMC Fits Within



### **How is a “District” structured and how does it operate?**

Districts are an administrative and geographical grouping of local churches and are headed by a District Superintendent and various District committees. District Superintendents serve as an extension of the office of the bishop by overseeing clergy and churches within their district. The Capital District Superintendent is Rev. Teresa Welborn.

### **How often do these Conferences meet and what happens at these meetings?**

The Rio Texas Conference, led by Bishop Rec. Robert Schnase, meets annually. There are an equal number of clergy and lay delegates present, and each church receives a number of lay delegates based on a formula developed by the annual conference, based roughly on the size of the church’s congregation. At the annual meeting of the Rio Texas Conference various resolutions and other matters are voted on by the delegates. Prior to each General and Jurisdictional Conference, the delegates at the Annual Conference elect lay and clergy delegates to attend those conferences.

The Jurisdictional Conference meets every four years, a few months after the General Conference meeting. A major function of the Jurisdictional meeting is to elect and assign Bishops to serve the Annual Conferences located within the Jurisdiction.

### **What is the role and structure of the General Conference?**

The General Conference is the legislative body of the United Methodist Church and makes policy decisions for the entire United Methodist Church worldwide. The General Conference is composed of an equal number of clergy delegates and lay delegates elected from the various annual conferences from around the world (not less than 600 nor more than 1,000).

### **How often does the General Conference meet?**

The General Conference meets every four years unless a Special General Conference is called by the Council of Bishops. The next General Conference will be May 5-15, 2020.

### **What is a Bishop and what is the Council of Bishops?**

In the UMC, bishops serve as administrative and pastoral superintendents of the church. A Bishop presides over each Annual Conference. The Council of Bishops is composed of all the elected bishops in the United Methodist Church worldwide.

### **What is the *Book of Discipline*?**

*The Book of Discipline* is the basic law and statement of beliefs of the United Methodist Church and is organized by numbered paragraphs. *The Book of Discipline* is composed of the following parts:

- Constitution of the United Methodist Church (beginning Paragraph 1)
- Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task (beginning Paragraph 102)
- Ministry of all Christians (beginning Paragraph 120)
- Social Principles (beginning Paragraph 160)
- Organization and Administration sections (beginning Paragraph 201)

*The Book of Discipline* can be changed by the General Conference with a majority vote. However, amendments to the Constitution of the United Methodist Church must receive a 2/3rds vote by the delegates of the General Conference and be ratified by 2/3rds of all the delegates, cumulatively, of all the Annual and Central Conferences worldwide. New Books of Discipline are printed after each General Conference Session. The current *Book of Discipline* is from the

2016 General Conference, although some changes were made at the special-called General Conference in 2019. Those changes go into effect in the US on January 1, 2020.

## **Questions about How Bethany UMC is Governed**

### **What is the Administrative Board?**

Bethany is governed by its Administrative Board, consisting of approximately 80 – 100 people. These people are first nominated by the Nominations Committee of the church, and then officially elected at the Church Conference. The assignment of new members is staggered, such that each year approximately one third of the members are new, and each person serving on the Administrative Board serves a three-year term.

The Administrative Board typically meets four times a year, and focuses on reports from each of the subcommittees, ministry areas, and pastors. The Administrative Board is led by a chairperson, and a vice-chairperson who serve two-year terms. The vice-chairperson becomes the next chairperson. Each chairperson is alternately male and then female.

### **What is the Church Conference?**

The Church Conference is typically held annually in January, and is open to all members of Bethany. The Church Conference is usually presided over by the District Superintendent. At the Church Conference votes are taken to approve/disapprove the following:

- Administrative Board and other Committee member positions
- Annual budget, including taking on debt if proposed
- Pastor salaries
- Purchases or sales of property owned by the church

### **What is the Board of Trustees?**

Property and facilities matters are handled by the Board of Trustees, which elects a chairperson from its members, has its own portion of the budget and often brings special needs to the Administrative Board.

### **What additional committees does Bethany have and how are their members selected?**

Bethany has several committees made up of congregants at the church. Each year the Nominations Committee (see below) nominates people and the Church Conference approves them to serve on multi-year terms for each committee. Each year a new “class” of members joins the committee (ex. approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  of its members rotate on and off each year for a committee that serves a three-year term), such that there are always new members and experienced members serving on each committee. The committees, range between 9 – 15 members and are as follows:

- **Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC)** - Provides oversight over the pastors and staff and addresses related personnel issues.
- **Finance Committee** - Provides oversight for financial matters including recommending a budget to the Administrative Board and oversight over the spending by the church staff.
- **Nominations Committee** - Works with the Lead Pastor to identify people to serve on all of the church committees, as well as the Board of Trustees.

### **What are Lay Delegates and how are they selected?**

Lay Delegates are Bethany UMC members who represent our church at the Annual

Conference. These delegates are also nominated by the Nominations Committee, and approved at the annual Church Conference. Bethany is allotted the number of its lay delegates according to the total membership of the congregation.

Lay delegates typically serve a six-year term and must be able to take off from their jobs for several days during the week to attend Annual Conference. Annual Conference has been held in the recent past at the Convention Center in Corpus Christi, usually the first or second week of June. It will be moving in 2021 to McAllen, TX.

In addition, Bethany is also represented at the Annual Conference by all of the Bethany pastors are clergy, who serve as Clergy Delegates.

### **What is the Lead Team?**

The Lead Team is a smaller group (about 20 persons), comprised of the chairpersons of the above committees, the pastors, and additional laity nominated by the Lead Pastor. The Lead Team is responsible for advising the Lead Pastor on matters related to future programs and emphases for the entire church. The Lead Team recently served as the building committee during the planning, funding and construction of the Worship Center. They also played an advisory role in the crafting of Bethany's updated core vision.

### **Where could I find a list of who is currently serving on all of the above committees?**

The list of all Administrative Board members, committee members, and Lead Team members is available on the Bethany website under the Facilities & Admin button.

### **Who owns church buildings and property in the United Methodist Church?**

Ownership of church property is complicated. Church property is owned by the local church or organization, but operated in trust.

For complete understanding, Section 2501 of the 2016 *Book of Discipline* states as follows:

“All properties of United Methodist local churches and other United Methodist agencies and institutions are held, *in trust*, for the benefit of the entire denomination, and ownership and usage of church property is subject to the *Discipline*. This trust requirement is an essential element of the historic policy of The United Methodist Church and its predecessor denominations or communions and has been a part of the *Discipline* since 1797. It reflects the connectional structure of the Church by ensuring that the property will be used solely for purposes consonant with the mission of the entire denomination as set forth in the *Discipline*. The trust requirement is thus a fundamental expression of United Methodism whereby local churches and other agencies and institutions within the denomination are both held accountable to and benefit from their connection with the entire worldwide church.”

## **Advanced Questions about the Broader UMC Church Structure**

### **How does one become a delegate to the Jurisdictional and General Conference?**

Delegates to Jurisdictional and General Conference are elected by the delegates of the Annual Conferences the year before the next General and Jurisdictional Conferences. Persons desiring to become delegates campaign to get elected by the delegates of the Annual Conference. Each Annual Conference sends an equal number of lay and clergy delegates to both Jurisdictional and General Conference. The number of delegates sent by an Annual

Conference to either the Jurisdictional or General Conference depends on the total membership of the churches in the Annual Conference.

### **What does a bishop do in the UMC?**

Bishops are ordained elders of the United Methodist Church nominated by the delegates of an annual conference and then elected by the delegates of the Jurisdictional Conference as needed. Once a bishop is elected, he is assigned to an annual conference, or in some cases, to more than one annual conference. Bishops are assigned to administer an area other than within which his or her membership was most recently held. Bishops preside over the Annual Conference they are assigned to, they rule on questions of church law at the Annual Conference, and generally supervise and assign pastors to the various local churches in the Annual Conference. Once elected and consecrated, bishops become a part of the College of Bishops (all Bishops in their specific jurisdiction) as well as the Council of Bishops (all the various bishops in the worldwide United Methodist Church).

### **What is the Judicial Council?**

The Judicial Council is similar to the Supreme Court of the United States government. It is made up of 9 members and serves as the highest judicial body in the UMC. The Judicial Council has authority to determine the constitutionality of any act of the General Conference, to hear and determine any appeal from a bishop's decision on a question of law made in the annual conference, to rule on decisions of law made by bishops in annual conferences, to hear and determine the legality of any action by any General Conference, jurisdictional or central conference board or body, and to have such other duties and powers as may be conferred upon it by the General Conference.

### **What are the doctrinal standards?**

The doctrinal standards are located in Paragraphs 103-104 of the *Book of Discipline*. The standards consist of The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church; The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church; The Standard Sermons of Wesley; The Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament (by John Wesley); and the General Rules of the United Methodist Church. The Articles of Religion and The Confession of Faith articulate key parts of the historic Christian faith, of which Methodism has always been a part. They are protected in the Constitution from being changed, altered or revoked, or from the General Conference establishing anything that goes against these standards. Wesley's Sermons and Notes provide us with resources that help us understand and dig deeper into different aspects of our doctrine. The General Rules provide practical application of our doctrine for living as a disciple of Jesus.