

March 9, 2021

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As members of your elected delegation to General and Jurisdictional Conferences, we bring you greetings during this unsettled time in our denomination. We thank you for the affirmation of our continued work as your representatives in these important gatherings of our global Church. While our work has been held up somewhat by the pandemic, it has not been completely set aside and we wanted to share some recent updates as well as invite further conversations throughout our Annual Conference regarding the future of the denomination and our ministry together.

First of all, we would be sorely remiss if we did not acknowledge the passing of our friend Heath Husted. Heath was the fourth-elected lay person to our delegation and brought a much-needed and wise voice to all of our work. Heath's perspective from his various ministry experiences, his deep, deep faith and commitment to the Church, and his infectious, winsome spirit is very much missed. We are undeniably the poorer as a delegation for this loss. We continue to pray for Pam and the boys as they make their way without Heath and ask you to hold them in prayer as well.

As you may have already seen or heard, the 2020 General Conference (which was postponed to August-September of this year) has been postponed *again*, to August-September of 2022. A helpful news story can be found [here](#). There is much-needed work—which can *only* be done by General Conference—that is being delayed as a result, including, but not limited to the “Protocol” legislation as well as many other proposals to restructure and re-imagine our world-wide denomination, not to mention thousands of other pieces of legislation. While we feel disappointment and frustration at this delay, we recognize the complex decision to once again postpone General Conference was not taken lightly or ill-advisedly.

That said, we also note the proposal from the Council of Bishops to find a way to take up *some* of the General Conference's work this year, through a called, one-day virtual session on May 8th and a subsequent mail ballot for 12 pieces of legislation that are critical for this interim time (also in the above-referenced news article). These items are extremely narrow changes to the Book of Discipline that modify language tying a whole host of actions to fixed dates of General Conference. Because General Conference 2020 has not yet met, many of these actions are being held up, including a General Church budget, the retirement, election, and assignment of bishops, as well as the nomination and election of annual conference leadership for the quadrennium. Addressing and voting on these items will help the whole Church inch forward during this pandemic.

Part of that legislation, however, does affect New Mexico. Specifically, the proposed changes with respect to the retirement, election, and assignment of bishops has implications for the timeline of Bishop Bledsoe's retirement—originally scheduled for July of 2020. If the proposed changes are adopted, Bishop Bledsoe would be able to retire this year, with another bishop assigned to oversee our Conference at a virtual session of the South Central Jurisdiction in July.

At a February ZOOM meeting, delegation members took part in a webinar with information from South Central Jurisdiction leaders about possible scenarios related to these matters. What has been proposed by our South Central College of Bishops is a variety of *interim* arrangements. In every possible proposed arrangement, the New Mexico Annual Conference is paired with the bishop assigned to the Rio Texas Conference. In short, *while no decisions have yet been made*, when Bishop Bledsoe retires, it is very likely that we will share a bishop with Rio Texas (not unlike our sharing a bishop currently with Northwest Texas). Again, no decisions have been made and this will be an arrangement for the interim. What happens denominationally, and how the assignment of bishops will happen beyond this short-term arrangement is unclear.

What remains absolutely clear, however, *and what is imperative for all of us to remember*, is that **there are no plans to merge annual conferences or realign annual conference boundaries at this moment.** Indeed, given the uncertainty at the denominational and jurisdictional level, it is obvious that the disciplinary definition of the annual conference as the “basic body of the church” holds true now more than ever. That means that the New Mexico Annual Conference, our leadership, our structures, our teams, and our administrative and missional activities will be critical for carrying us all forward into the next few years. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to lean into our shared connectional work as an annual conference—supporting the mission and ministries of our local churches, empowering laity for ministry and discipleship, evaluating, credentialing, and deploying clergy to serve in our churches, and all the other unique functions of an annual conference.

We recognize that this is a lot of information and that much of it is preliminary or contingent, but we wanted to be sure to keep everyone as informed as possible. We will continue to share information as we receive it, and we intend to offer a Q&A session at this year's Annual Conference (June 13-16) to address these and other concerns as they come up. In the meantime, we also wish to remind everyone that there is a delegation email address (delegation@nmconfum.com) for you to ask questions, seek further clarification, provide input, or even share a prayer—we could certainly use your prayers! We are also drafting a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document, to be hosted on the Conference website, that covers some of these topics. Lastly, we wanted to be sure to point everyone towards the official UMC page for matters related to General Conference, <https://www.umc.org/en/who-we-are/structure/general-conference>, where you will find all sorts of helpful information about General Conference, how it works, as well as find updates as they become available.

In Christ,

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