

Now and Not Yet

David Livingston's Buyer Beware: What the GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline Really Says, Parts 1-7, February 9 - March 14

Pt 1 The Good

Pt 2 Power

Pt 3 Bishops and Appointments

Pt 4 Judicial Process

Pt 5 Inclusion and Representation

Pt. 6: Theology and Sacraments

Pt. 7: Social Concerns

Pt. 8: Financial Implications

[Miles notes: You will see that this list of the 8 parts is a little different from the plan he laid out in the first post. He changed his plan a bit as he went along.]

Wednesday, February 9, 2022

Buyer Beware: What the Global Methodist Church's Book of Doctrines and Discipline Really Says, Pt.1

There's a common complaint in Congress that bills are voted on before anyone has a chance to read them. We have all had a chance to read the [Transitional Book of Doctrine and Discipline \(BDD\)](#). It has been available online for several months and modified a handful of times. Although it is available, my hunch is it hasn't been read by many. I get it - it's a big, boring document. Just like the Book of Discipline. But if you are considering joining the new GMC it would be good to see what the foundational document really says.

This series of posts are intended to share with you some of what is in the BDD that you may not realize is there. It is not intended to be mean-spirited. In fact, I hope that some of what I found will be modified by the GMC, either before or during their first General Conference (or equivalent). You may find some of what I point out to be features of the new denomination, not bugs. I just want you to go in, if you choose to do so, with open eyes. There are many misrepresentations and misinterpretations of what the book really says. So, with that, here's the plan:

Pt 1 The Good

Pt 2 Power

Pt 3 Bishops

Pt 4 Judicial Process

Pt 5 Social Concerns and Issues of Inclusion and Representation

Pt 6 Theology and Sacraments

Pt 7 Apportionments and Money

The Good Stuff

1. **Scripture References:** As a denomination that is basing its existence on the idea that they hold Scripture in higher regard than the rest of us, one would hope the BDD would reflect this by referencing Scripture. It does. It isn't completely consistent in this (and I don't think God has spoken on issues like how many people should serve on a committee) and there is, in my opinion, some occasional proof texting, but on the whole I appreciate that there is appropriate Scriptural justification for various positions. We have this in the current Book of Discipline (BOD) as well, but not quite like the BDD does.

2. **Organizational Freedom:** Recently our office manager found a church newsletter from the week following the Uniting Conference of 1968. Among the listed ways that the new denomination would impact local churches: organizational freedom within the local church. I mention that only to note that we've been working on this one for a while. There is far more freedom now than there was in 1968 or 1998. the BDD gives a little more, and I think that's mostly a good thing.

3. **General Conference Petitions:** This is almost entirely inconsequential, but it still stuck out to me. A petition to General Conference through "unofficial" channels must have 10 signatures of members instead of only 1. There are so many odd petitions that general conference has to deal with. This would help a little with that. And, honestly, if you can't get nine friends to sign on to your petition it's pretty clear that it doesn't need to be discussed.

4. **One aspect of inclusion:** If you've read anything I've written you already know that I am very much on the side of LGBT+ inclusion. As you'll see in the future, that gets even worse in the GMC. But I do appreciate one piece of inclusion. The BDD specifies "tribal" inclusion. In the U.S. this is unnecessary. In some other parts of the world, this is a critical issue that should not be ignored. I may have overlooked it, but I don't remember seeing anything of this clarity in the current BOD.

5. **Size:** The BDD is substantially shorter than the current BOD. I would love to have a very short BOD and a somewhat larger "Book of good ideas" that are not mandated but strongly encouraged. It's nearly impossible to cut things out of the current book, so the GMC is appropriately taking advantage of this moment to cut out a great deal of material. Having said that, I think it's important to note that books like this tend to grow over time. The BDD will never be shorter than it is the day it is officially adopted. So this is also my first "Buyer Beware" moment. Remember when comparing the BDD to the current BOD that both documents will change over time. The BOD will actually change first. Some of the ideas that we find in the BDD will likely find their way into the UMC's organization and structure. So every comparison of the two, including this one, cannot help but be a little bit of apples and oranges.

Next Up: One of the complaints we hear a lot is the power that groups within the UMC have. General Boards and Agencies, Bishops, and people with the purse strings allegedly control denominational decisions. The GMC is supposed to fix this. I think, at least in the short term, it may make the power dynamics worse.

Thursday, February 10, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Disciplines, Pt. 2: Power

The GMC's, [Book of Doctrines and Disciplines](#) (BDD) is the best source we have for what the new denomination will really practice. In Part 1 of this series, I noted five things that I appreciated about the book. Now we start to dig in a little deeper.

One of the refrains that I hear on the traditionalist side of our current divide is that we have power problems. Centrists are actually "institutionalists" and part of that means keeping power structures the way that they are. We need a decentralized system for the 21st century.

I think it's a fair criticism, and one that the UMC will need to address in significant ways in the future. I'm not sure the GMC really addresses this, though. You will see this in future posts about bishops and money. In this post, I want to address some issues of power unrelated to these topics. In this and all future posts, paragraph numbers will refer to the October revision of the Book of Doctrines and Disciplines, which you can find at the link above.

Power

1. **The Transitional Leadership Council (TLC):** Before we get to specific paragraphs, I want to address an overriding, repeated concern. To be fair, starting a new denomination is a big idea requiring a herculean effort from a few people and lots of other effort from lots of other people. I don't know how I would do it. I do know that as you read throughout the BDD the Transitional Leadership Council shows up all over the place. This group of 18 mostly U.S. clergy (it can expand later) has almost unilateral authority to change anything that they want to change between now and the first General Conference (or equivalent) of the GMC. Even after the organizing conference this group will retain a great deal of power (more on this later). The BDD is effectively their document and if you choose to join the GMC prior to their organizing conference you are joining on their terms. Again, I don't know if there is a different way to do this. The series is titled "Buyer Beware," not "Don't Buy It." Just go in with your eyes wide open.

2. **Removal of Membership:** Traditionalists have been very clear that we need to take our beliefs seriously. Paragraph 322 lives that out in an extreme way. After charging each congregation to "establish and communicate clear expectations of their members," 322.3 says, "Negligent members may be placed on an inactive roll by a two-thirds vote of the church council." After two years on the inactive roll, during which the person can hold no office and have no vote, they can be removed entirely from membership. There is also a process for removing a member due to a chargeable offense. That process, like the UMC, includes a hearing and a right to appeal. This is not that. As best as I can tell, the decision of a local church regarding someone's membership is final. A local church can choose to simply kick a member out.

3. **Hierarchical Clergy:** We have issues with this in the UMC, too. Officially there is no hierarchy, at least not between elders and deacons (one could argue either way on local pastors). Unofficially, elders and deacons are often treated differently. In paragraph 403, the GMC returns to a two-stage ordination (pre-1996 in the UMC). This means a person is first ordained deacon. Some will choose to stay as permanent deacons. Others will choose to move on to ordination as an elder. There is no distinction between a permanent deacon with decades of experience and what in UMC terminology would be a provisional elder with one year of experience.

4. **Power over Education:** This is probably the strangest piece you'll see in this whole series. Paragraph 407.b details the educational requirements for deacons after ordination. Since ordination happens sooner, it's reasonable that some additional course work would be required. But you don't get free reign to choose your work. After listing the kinds of courses that are acceptable (all of which are very reasonable), we learn "[The courses the deacon chooses] will be determined in consultation with the presiding elder (district superintendent) in consideration of the deacon's ministry setting." A deacon, either permanent or still in process, does not have the freedom to choose their courses.

5. **Denominational Merger:** I've already shared that I understand starting a new denomination requires some unusual powers. This one seems extreme. In paragraph 522.2, the TLC appoints a special commission of nine people for the purpose of recommending if other denominations should be able to join/merge with the GMC. 522.2b then gives sole authority to the TLC to determine "a plan of union to be effective immediately or to recommend such a plan of union to be approved at the convening General Conference." It does stipulate that the merging denomination must agree with the doctrinal and moral principles of the GMC. With that exception, this paragraph gives the TLC authority to approve any merger with any terms at any time before the convening conference takes place.

6. **Diminishing Laity:** The UMC has numerous requirements for proportional representation. Honestly, I think we probably have more than we need. The GMC has fewer. Some will like that and some won't. One board in particular caught my eye. Currently, laity must represent between 20% and 33% of the membership of the Board of Ordained Ministry. The BDD eliminates the minimum threshold. Members are nominated by the bishop. A bishop could choose to nominate as few as zero laity to serve on the board. Individual bishops actually have significantly more practical power in the GMC than in the UMC. We'll get to all of that in the next post in this series. I put this one here to focus on the diminishment of the power of laity.

7. **Transition over Time:** Part seven of the BDD is about the connectional structure, beginning with the TLC. Again, this small group has unfettered power until the first convening conference. For all practical purposes, this is their document and they can change the rules whenever they want to. Paragraph 703 says they are, "empowered to make all necessary decisions related to the forming and initial operating of the Global Methodist Church until the effective date of legislation adopted by the convening General Conference. 703.2.o gives the TLC the power to decide when that convening conference will take place. Please hear me: I don't know if there is a different way of doing this. Somebody has to do the work. It seems important that this is acknowledged. Having said that, their power will continue indefinitely even after the convening

conference. Paragraph 702 implies that their work will be transitioned over time to new connectional structures.

8. **Bureaucracy Is Coming:** Probably not massive bureaucracy. That would be inconsistent with the stated goals of the leadership and there won't be enough funds (at least at first) to maintain it. But remember that an organization only grows over time, just like our current BOD has grown. Paragraph 705 gives a pretty lean transitional structure that, presumably, will continue intact after the convening conference. The last subpoint is the key one. "Transitional commissions may also be formed in other areas not named above..." There is no inherent limit to the size the organization can reach.

I think half of these eight concerns could be easily remedied and maybe even will be by the end of the convening conference. For example, the inability of a member to appeal their membership being revoked could simply be an oversight (or I may have just missed something). The other half are, I think, just the way it is for now. The next post, on bishops and appointments, is different. I'm pretty confident that everything you will read there is exactly as intended. And it's not all as originally advertised.

Monday, February 14, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, Pt. 3: Bishops and Appointments

We have spent years, probably decades, in the UMC talking about our method of clergy deployment. We've also gone back and forth on the power of bishops. Nearly everyone across the theological spectrum agrees that some changes are needed, although we disagree about what some of those changes are.

In this post, I will address some of the changes that are made in the GMC's Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD). Like the rest of this series, this is not intended to be comprehensive. I'm focusing on changes (or in a few places an anticipated change) that are likely unexpected. For example, the GMC puts a term limit on bishops. If you have been following UMC politics you probably already know that, so I'm not going to spend time on it. The six items below, though, surprised me and might also surprise you. As before, I'm listing these in order of the current paragraph number in the BDD. The first two relate directly to appointments. The others are more about the powers that bishops have.

Bishops and Appointments

1. **Appointment Process:** I remember seeing a pastor write that he would like to leave for the GMC solely because he would prefer a call system over the appointment system. Don't do that. You will be disappointed. My memory is that the initial draft of a new appointment process from the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) included a hybrid call/appointment system. I don't remember the details and I can't locate the source. It seems like the church was able to "interview" a few candidates that were selected by the bishop with a requirement that at least one candidate be a woman or BIPOC. There was significant backlash from some with the traditionalist leadership and, for the sake of maintaining unity, that form of clergy deployment was abandoned. The new form of deployment, found in paragraph 509, is essentially identical to the old system. The bishop appoints; Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) is consulted. This is stated explicitly in 345.8.i (the responsibilities of SPRC), 509.2 ("...clergy shall be appointed by the bishop, who is empowered to make and fix all appointments..."), and 510. 510 contains the only true change. If a church doesn't like the change being made, they can voice their concern and the bishop must respond. If you believe critics of our current system, bishops are already good at coming up with excuses for appointments (see the Mt. Bethel situation). If you are leaving the UMC because you don't like how appointments are made, you need to reconsider.

2. **Unilateral Pastoral Change:** In a pinch, bishops can act even without consultation. The BDD puts a great deal of effort into making sure everyone is theologically on the same page. That makes sense - it's part of their reason for existence. In that spirit, paragraph 354 provides a mechanism for removing a congregation from the denomination (we'll come back to this in the sixth and final post). It also provides a mechanism for removing a pastor. 355.1 begins, "If the current pastor of the congregation is promoting doctrines or practices contrary to those of the Global Methodist Church, the bishop shall remove the pastor and appoint a pastor who will..." Similarly, to how a local church can remove a member with no recourse for the member, this

appears to be an unlimited power. Bishop Scott Jones has contended that any teaching of a church is doctrine. Certainly anything in the BDD could be considered a "practice." Theoretically, a pastor who doesn't put the right number of people on a committee could be removed. Combined with the removal of guaranteed appointments, there is, as best as I can tell, literally nothing a pastor OR local church can do in this situation.

3. Ordination Authority: In the UMC, we have a system of checks and balances. Ordination, for example, is conferred by the bishop upon vote of the Board of Ordained Ministry and the clergy session. This raises a question: Could the Board and clergy approve someone who the bishop has to ordain whom the bishop believes is not qualified for ministry (say, in a conference with a traditionalist bishop and more progressive clergy)? Currently, the answer seems to be yes. That person would then, of course, be chargeable and we have a process for that which may or may not be followed. None of that happens in the BDD. Paragraphs 409.2 (for deacons) and 410.1.d (for elders) dictate that ordinands must be approved by the Board, the clergy, AND the bishop. Effectively, the bishop has a veto on the Board and clergy decisions regarding ordination regardless of their reason. Again, I don't see a recourse for the candidate.

4. Removing a Pastor (the hard way): On one hand, removing a pastor is extraordinarily easy now (there's still one more point on this to come). On the other hand, if a bishop (or others) want a pastor removed in the traditional United Methodist way (involuntary leave of absence), it's exceedingly difficult. Paragraph 415.4 requires that it be requested by the bishop and a supermajority of the cabinet, Board of Ordained Ministry, and clergy session must all agree. If I were a bishop and wanted a pastor gone I would never utilize this paragraph which, incidentally, is the only process for removal other than filing charges that contains an appeal process for the pastor.

5. Another Easy Way: By far the easiest way to remove a pastor with no repercussions for the bishop is to simply not appoint them. Paragraph 512 gives them this power. The bishop has to share a rationale (again, this is allegedly a very simple thing for a bishop to do today) and the pastor is no longer under appointment. By the way, this action also takes away their voting right as Annual Conference, which just feels punitive to me. Again, it's important to note that while the bishop must provide a rationale for not appointing a pastor, there is no apparent recourse for the pastor if this decision is made.

I want to take another moment with this before moving on to the last power play a bishop can make. In this system, a bishop can veto the BOM and clergy's decision to ordain a person. Failing that, the bishop can simply choose not to appoint a person. Failing that, a bishop can change their appointment at will (like the current system). Failing that, the bishop can unilaterally remove a pastor from their appointment. There are four separate ways that a bishop can prevent a person from serving a church without the pastor having any recourse.

6. Stacking the Deck: Finally, we come to the bishop's power in the organization of the Annual Conference. Paragraph 613 lists six mandatory organizational components. I will add a seventh significant one that isn't mentioned there for this final concern. 1) The Board of Ordained Ministry - which the bishop nominated; 2) the Episcopacy Committee; 3) The Finance Committee; 4) the Leadership Committee (a new name for Nominating Committee), which the

bishop both nominates and chairs and which all presiding elders (District Superintendents) are members; 5) the Committee on Investigation, which is nominated by the bishop, 6) the Administrative Review Committee, which is nominated by the bishop, and 7) the Cabinet, which of course is made up of people appointed by the bishop. Five of these seven structures are nominated or appointed directly by the bishop. The other two are nominated by a group that was itself nominated by and chaired by the bishop. Yes, the Annual Conference must approve these nominations. The next time an Annual Conference session rejects a bishop's nominations will be the first, and even if that did happen the bishop could simply nominate another person.

In summary, for an organization that doesn't trust the bishops, bishops have an extraordinary amount of power in the proposed GMC.

Next up: six concerns about the GMC's judicial process.

Wednesday, February 16, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, Pt. 4: Judicial Process

I'm not an expert on the judicial system - either in the UMC or in the secular courts. I found six areas in section 8 of the GMC's new Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD) that concern me. There could also be easy explanations. As I've said before, that's the why the series is called "Buyer Beware" instead of "Don't Buy!". Take a look and let me know if you see something I'm missing.

Judicial Process

1. **Double Jeopardy:** Paragraph 805.8 doesn't allow for double jeopardy. Double jeopardy is when a person is charged a second time for the same offense. My reading of our current Book of Discipline (BOD) is that we have a blanket protection from double jeopardy. The BDD changes that. It adds a condition. "This means, barring new compelling information or facts..." This seems to me to be significant to me for two reasons. First, it largely negates what double jeopardy is about. Second, without a definition of "compelling information or facts" virtually anything could be construed as worthy of a second charge.

2. **A Non-Disciplinary Discipline:** Beginning with paragraph 806.1 extensive mention is made of the Judicial Practices and Procedures (JPP). You can find the current draft of this document [here](#). I have skimmed it, but not reviewed in full. It is referenced 27 times in the BDD. I appreciate that this is public. In the UMC today the bishops have guidelines they follow which are not easily and publicly available. However, the BDD gives great deference to the JPP. There appear to be several pieces of the judicial process that are governed only by this document. Further, and most significantly, the Transitional Leadership Council appears to have the right to approve and modify the JPP at any time. Unless the GMC's convening conference changes this authority, **the TLC could change the rules governing trials at any time including between sessions of General Conference.**

3. **Chargeable Offenses:** Paragraph 808.1 lists the chargeable offenses for clergy and laity. They are largely identical to our current lists, but with one notable difference. The clergy offenses include, "Engaging in sexual activities outside the bonds of a loving and monogamous marriage..." including same sex relationships, abuse, infidelity, pornography, etc. This is not an offense for the laity. It strikes me as odd that a denomination formed largely on the basis of one issue, human sexuality, would omit laity from any official responsibility for their behavior.

4. **More Power for the Bishop:** I could have listed this in my post on bishops' power, too. Paragraph 809.2 covers the possibility of a pastor being suspended pending an investigation. Currently, as a protection for the clergy, a pastor can be suspended from an appointment only at the request of the bishop and with the approval of the Board of Ordained Ministry's executive committee. I'm aware of at least one instance when a board refused to go along with the bishop.

The bishop was not happy. So now that's resolved. The only check on the bishops' power is that the cabinet (who the bishop appointed) has to agree to the suspension.

5. Council of No Appeal: The Council of Appeals replaces our judicial council. Note that in paragraph 821.5, the Council has the right to not make records public. The language is phrased to suggest that all records should be public, but it says they are public unless the Council, "decides otherwise on a case by case basis..." There is no appeal of this decision. And I'm not talking about their deliberations. Those are always private. All the documents that they are relying on for a decision could be kept completely confidential and there is no equivalent to a Freedom of Information Act to override their decision.

6. The One I Like: Finally, paragraph 822. This paragraph delineates who has jurisdiction to file various claims with the Council. If you don't have jurisdiction, you can't submit a claim. 822.3 relates to a claim against the action of a regional (jurisdictional) or annual conference like, say, the election of an openly gay bishop. In the BDD, only the jurisdiction or conference itself (or the bishops of that region) can appeal a decision. In 2016 the Southcentral Jurisdiction appealed the decision of the Western Jurisdiction to elect Bishop Karen Oliveto. Although from a practical standpoint it didn't matter, the Judicial Council ruled in favor of the appeal. In the BDD that appeal, the one that set off a firestorm, would not have been allowed. Traditionalists often complain about the Western Jurisdiction. There will be **less** accountability for jurisdictions under the BDD than under the current BOD.

This last point leads to a reminder about the purpose of these posts. I will not be in the GMC. At the end of the day, as someone on social media complained to me, this book will have no impact on me. The purpose of this series is so that those who are considering joining the GMC can go in with their eyes wide open and so that those who definitely will be joining the GMC might consider some changes. If you find this approach helpful, you're welcome. If it's not helpful, you're under no obligation to read the last three parts. Next: Part 5 will be the shortest. Four points related to inclusiveness and representation. This is intentional. We all know the overall position of the GMC on LGBT+ rights. Even with that, there are a few things you should be aware of.

Friday, February 18, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, an Interlude: Comparing the GMC and UMC

A couple comments on social media about this series have rightly pointed out that the transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD) are temporary. The BDD will take effect when the Global Methodist Church (GMC) is officially launched and cease to be in effect when the GMC's convening conference concludes, estimated at 12-18 months following the creation of the new denomination. Why, then, take the time for this critique?

Two reasons:

First, because this is the document we have. There is a second document, a proposed WCA Book of Doctrines and Disciplines, which has substantial differences from the BDD. To the best of my knowledge, it was last updated in 2020 and is not publicly available. Tom Lambrecht, who is both affiliated with the WCA and the GMC, [wrote](#), "*Ultimately, the GM Church's convening General Conference, composed of delegates elected from among those who align with the new church, will have the authority to formally adopt a new, more permanent Book of Doctrines and Discipline. It will undoubtedly build upon the Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline, the WCA's recommendations, and other ideas laity and clergy wish to propose.*" I'm sure this is true. Ideas from both documents as well as new ideas will be shared. But there is a reason that the WCA book is not the one that is being promoted or made available. My understanding is that when it was first shared there was considerable pushback from other traditionalists on several areas. If I was going to join a new denomination, I would want to know the basics of what I was signing on to. The BDD is the best place right now to look for that.

Second, there is a matter of fairness. In the UMC, the Book of Discipline (BOD) is effectively rewritten every four years (at least up until this delay of General Conference we are experiencing now!). We will continue to talk about ideas that the GMC plans to implement - term bishops, lower apportionments, leaner structure, changes to itineracy, etc. Whether in 2022, 2024, or 2028 I fully expect some of these will be written into the BOD. Nevertheless, critics of the UMC will look at the BOD as it is now written. You can find comparison charts now and without exception they begin with what the 2016 BOD says. As it should be. We can't predict the future. So the GMC says they will have lower apportionments. Compared to what? Compared to our current bloated system which undoubtedly will change. I don't fault them for making this comparison even though I think down the road the difference in apportionments will actually be minimal. So if the GMC proponents can critique the BOD, which is fair for them to do, then what document of the GMC should UMC proponents fairly critique? How do we compare and consider the two if one is treated as if it is written in stone and the other as if it is written in jello? Am I considering a denomination with a call system or an appointment system? What will my apportionments actually be? What powers will the bishops really have? These are fair and legitimate questions that need to be asked.

As I've said before, this series is all about helping people see what they are signing up for. If you are considering the GMC, undoubtedly there are parts that concern me which you will love. My bug is your feature. So be it. There may also be parts that drive you away. You can factor that into your decision to join and, if you do join, into changes you would want to make. Or you can simply stop reading what I write and spend your time on something else instead. You choose.

Monday, February 28, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, Pt. 5: Inclusion and Representation

The question of LGBT+ inclusion is the starting point for the existence of the Global Methodist Church (GMC). Yes, some will our divide is really about the continual liberal direction of the denomination. But we never had people leave because of abortion when the denomination was pretty clearly pro-choice (prior to 2016). Yes, many will attribute the divide to a generalized disagreement over "the authority of Scripture." But I don't remember ever debating the authority of Scripture at General Conference. The truth is the impasse we face is ultimately because of our disagreement on LGBT+ inclusion.

Having said that, this post has the fewest points of the eight.

This is because I'm not trying to point out all the differences between the UMC and GMC. I'm focused only on what surprised me. You probably already know that the GMC will absolutely forbid ordination of a person who is married to another person of the same sex. So if you are hoping this post will be a "gotcha" lambasting the GMC for their discrimination you will be disappointed. There are some surprises, nevertheless.

Inclusion and Representation

1. **Non-Representative Leadership:** As I shared in the post on power, the Transitional Leadership Council (TLC) has an unprecedented amount of authority. Truly, I don't think think any person or small group has had this level of authority in Methodist history other than Wesley and Asbury. According to the latest draft of the Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD), there are 18 members of the TLC. A nineteenth, [Bishop Mike Lowery](#), was recently added. The GMC has gone out of their way to stress the global nature of this new denomination. Most likely a majority of its membership will come from outside the U.S. Only 4 of the 19 members of the TLC, 21%, come from outside the U.S. The GMC has worked very hard to be clear that women will have equal standing to men. Only 3 of the 19 members are women, none of them women of color. The denomination is supposedly de-emphasizing bishops (although if you read my entry on bishops you'll see that is debatable in practice). With the addition of Bishop Lowery, there are as many bishops as central conference representatives. Of the 15 U.S. members, only four are people of color. To be clear, the UMC does not have a great track record on any of these either. We don't have a great record on inclusiveness on any way that we might group people. For me, the difference is that when you are creating something new you are not bound by the baggage of the past. This is a new chance for a new denomination to show us who they want to be. For me, the TLC representation fails the test.

2. **Gender defined:** This is not really a surprise, but it felt important to me to point it out anyway. Paragraph 306 is the token paragraph on inclusion (there is mention in other places of inclusion; that is the focus of this paragraph). Among other categories, it includes a commitment to inclusiveness regardless of gender, "defined throughout...by a person's immutable biological traits identified by or before birth." Once upon a time, this description would have made complete sense to me. For the sake of brevity, I'll point out only the most obvious example. Depending on who you read anywhere from .02% to 1.7% of the population is born "intersex." A clear gender cannot be assigned to them. What the TDD calls "immutable" is very literally "mutable." In as many as 2 of every 1,000 births, the doctor chooses what genitalia the child will present. As is the case in every area of LGBT+ inclusion, I'm convinced the GMC is ultimately putting off a conversation that they will eventually need to confront.

3. **Inclusiveness Defined:** Paragraph 306 also defines inclusiveness itself. The definition is both brilliant and infuriating. "...inclusiveness means the freedom for the total involvement of all persons who meet the requirements of our Book of Doctrines and Discipline in the membership and leadership of the Church at any level and in every place." In other words, inclusiveness means if we let you in you are in. If we don't let you in then you are out.

4. **LGBT+ Leadership** - As mentioned in my very first post, I appreciate that the GMC allows for greater organizational freedom for local churches. That comes from paragraph 337. That same paragraph does create a new restriction: "Members of the church's governing board... [must be] loyal to the ethical standards of the Global Methodist Church." The use of the word "ethical" here is interesting. We'll see later that, unlike the UMC, the GMC's version of the Social Principles is clearly part of their doctrine that must be obeyed. The word "ethic" is only used in the BDD one other time in a context that makes it clear ethics are identified as those principles (in that paragraph distinguished from doctrine and called "Social Witness"). Most of the 14 principles in the Social Witness are uncontroversial. By my reading, only inclusion and abortion would create much debate in the UMC. I think 337 makes it clear that if you are, to use our current language, a "self-avowed, practicing homosexual" you would not be eligible for any leadership role within the denomination or local church. After reading the whole BDD carefully, I think you would be able to be a member of a church (with the OK of the pastor). You would not be a member with all the rights of membership because now you would officially not be allowed into a lay leadership role.

I could say a whole lot more about LGBT+ inclusion. For starters, as is the case with our current Book of Discipline, essentially nothing is said regarding any of the initials other than "L" and "G". A person may identify as bisexual, be married to a person of the opposite sex, and therefore be eligible to serve in all ways. A person who is transgender may argue that (following point 2

above) there are **biological traits** that could aid in a person's identity as transgender. There is no mention of any of the "+" groups in the abbreviation. But, again, the focus in this series is on what might surprise you, or at least what surprised me, that would be good to know.

Next time: five (or possibly six - still debating) - points regarding theology and sacraments.

Wednesday, March 9, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, Pt. 6: Theology and Sacraments

You will undoubtedly recall that many proponents of the new Global Methodist Church (GMC) claim our division is not about human sexuality but is actually about theology and the authority of Scripture. While I still believe that's overstated - our theology is not changing right now, only our stance on LGBT+ inclusion - it is true there are some differences. The key ones that I see which may surprise you are noted in this post.

Theology and Sacraments

1. **Goodbye Quad:** The so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral has been relentlessly attacked by traditionalists over the years. They will sometimes quote Albert Outler wishing he had never coined the term. That's not quite correct. Outler said he "more than once" regretted the term. There is a legitimate concern with how the Quadrilateral is sometimes taught and used. I appreciate [Phillip Brooks](#) analysis and approach from several years ago. In short, Scripture is our primary source of authority while reason, tradition, and Christian experience inform how we read and interpret Scripture. Our teaching of how the Quadrilateral functions should be addressed. Perhaps, as Brooks suggests, it should be renamed. The GMC simply does away with it altogether.

2. **Faith and Science:** This actually isn't a difference in theology. That's the surprise. Paragraph 202 is the GMC's equivalent to our Social Principles (more on this next time). Point 4 reads, "...we encourage dialogue between faith and science as mutual witnesses to God's creative power." I suspect this is here because of potentially controversial issues like evolution. What's noteworthy is that the sentence exists at all. This is the kind of thing that allegedly sets progressives apart from traditionalists. In fact, scientific advancement is one form of "Reason" that, as noted above, has been excised from the Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD).

3. **Infant Baptism:** in our current Book of Discipline, paragraph 226 says pastors "shall earnestly exhort all Christian parents or guardians to present their children" for baptism. A parent can opt not to have their child baptized, but they should be encouraged to do so. This is a problem for traditionalists. The large majority of traditionalist pastors in the UMC have no quarrel with infant baptism and, in fact, encourage it. But not all. One United Methodist Church (which I'm not naming here but I have a screenshot of their webpage says right on the internet, "At [name redacted], we baptize children when they are old enough to express their own decision to follow Jesus and understand the meaning of baptism." They aren't even pretending. But because, I assume, the GMC wants churches like this there is no calls for clergy trials for self-avowed, practicing non-infant baptizers. That problem is solved for the GMC because the BDD eliminates the "shall". In fact, baptism of infants and children is endorsed nowhere in the BDD except in the doctrinal standards. To make matters worse, an earlier draft of the BDD **did** expressly adopt infant baptism ("we believe that God has expressly given to children a

place within his kingdom..." but that paragraph was deleted from the current draft. To be clear, children **can** be baptized in this denomination. It is vastly reduced in importance.

4. **Grace is OK:** This one fascinates me. Portions of the BDD are taken nearly verbatim from the BOD. Which is fine - if there's no issue with the language just keep it. The baptismal vows should be a great example. I know there is some concern with how baptism is sometimes practice (for example, a pastor baptizing in the name of "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer"), but that is a violation of the language. The language itself is very traditional and orthodox. Yet it is changed. The new language renounces "the devil" instead of "spiritual forces of wickedness". OK, fine. Here's the shocker for me. "Will you obediently keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in them all the days of your life by the grace and power of God?" This seems to replace the current question, "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as Lord..." Note, first, the reversal of law and grace. This is a consistent theme throughout the BDD. It is a law book, within which grace makes some appearances. Note, second, that we no longer "put [our] whole trust in his grace". We promise now to keep God's will "by the grace and power of God." Grammatically, it's a small change. Theologically, I think it's significant.

5. **Communion:** This is nitpicking, but it definitely surprised me. Though often ignored, our current theology teaches that we should receive Communion weekly, or as often as possible. There is no mention of the frequency of Communion in the BDD

6. **Communion, Pt 2:** Another fascinating point. An earlier draft of the BDD included the statement, "Respecting our concern for those with health issues, congregations may provide gluten-free bread." That has been deleted from the current version. If I was on the writing team, I don't think I would have thought to include express approval of gluten-free communion. You may know that the Catholic church has [forbidden it](#), so a statement affirming the use may be of some value. I wonder how the decision was made, after it was initially included, to now reject it.

That's it. There are some other changes, but truly nothing that struck me as unexpected. In fact, if all of the theological changes were proposed at General Conference as changes to the current Book of Discipline I'd probably vote for nearly all of them (other than those mentioned here). There's not much radical stuff - which is why we shouldn't need to have this conversation about breaking up.

Next time: Earlier I shared four important notes on inclusiveness. Next we'll look at six concerns about social issues, including a flashback to baptism that I just picked up on while reviewing my notes for this post.

Friday, March 11, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, Pt. 7: Social Concerns

I've written previously in this series about issues related to inclusion and representation. Five of the six points in this post related to other kinds of social concerns. The sixth is related to inclusion, which I missed on my first reading of the GMC's Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD). As you'll see, the GMC doesn't seem to have a clear position on the importance of our social witness in the world.

Social Concerns

- 1. The Social Creed:** To the best of my knowledge, the Social Creed adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church North in 1908 was the first such statement in Methodist history. It is a well written, orthodox statement that concludes our current Social Principles. Paragraph 202 of the BDD affirms it as, "still remarkably relevant even today," This "relevant" paragraph is neither mentioned again nor included in the BDD. I'm not sure what to make of this simultaneous acknowledgement and exclusion. It could have been an oversight.
- 2. Social Issues that Matter:** Excluding the Creed, our current Social Principles cover 39 pages in the Book of Discipline (BOD). The new section of statements is less than two pages, with only 14 statements. As one who prefers a slimmer BOD, I don't mind a slimmer set of principles. I think this goes too far, but whether this is good or bad is in the eye of the beholder.
- 3. Not Just Opinions:** When I teach on the Social Principles, I say that any individual will likely find at least one statement to which they say, "I'm so glad I'm in a church that says this!" and at least one to which they say, "I can't believe I'm in a church that says that!" The Principles say of themselves that they are not church law. Not so in the GMC. Paragraph 339.16 orders each church to "promote awareness of and concurrence with...policies relative to the Social Witness of the church (paragraphs 201-202)." Via paragraphs 808.d and 808.k, I think this means a person, clergy or lay, could be kicked out of the denomination for promoting a belief contrary to those in the Social Witness. You can be kicked out of the UMC for promoting contrary doctrine, but the GMC seems to expand this to the Social Witness as well.
- 4. Local Churches and the Social Witness:** Individuals can be eliminated; so can whole churches. Paragraph 355 gives the process for a local church to join the GMC. One of the requirements is a vote to "endorse the doctrinal standards and Social Witness...". Part of the significance of this and the previous point is that the Social Witness clearly rises to the same level of importance as doctrine; effectively, it is doctrine.
- 5. Making Changes:** Part Six, section One of the BDD anticipates the Convening General Conference. Paragraph 604 sets the powers of that conference. Throughout the entire BDD, I can find no mention of a voting threshold for any amendments. The only indication that any portion of the BDD would require something other than a simple majority vote is paragraph 109 which, like the UMC, prevents changing the Articles of Religion or Confession of Faith. That is, until

we get to 604.14-15. Any change to the Social Witness section or "resolutions dealing with social concerns" require a three-fourths vote. This means in the GMC it will be far easier to change the entire ordination process, the appointment process, tenure of bishops, apportionments, or any of the other hot-button issues (other than human sexuality and abortion) than to add or remove a single sentence from the Social Witness. It is harder to make a change to the Social Witness than it is to amend the Constitution of the UMC.

6. The One I Missed: My last post was on theology and sacraments. If you read that you will recall some surprising changes to the baptismal vows. In my first reading, I missed a glaring one. Our UMC ritual includes a promise to serve Jesus, "as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races." Some pastors have added additional phrases to make it more inclusive. Some pastors don't use the official language at all in order to make baptism seem more authentic or natural. But this is our official language. Not in the GMC. The baptismal covenant in paragraph 316 makes no use of this or any similar language. To be clear, there are other places in the BDD where the GMC says there will be no discrimination based on race or, at least implicitly, age. I can understand how this could have happened if the liturgy was written from scratch, but it clearly wasn't. It's a bizarre omission. If you have an explanation, please let me know.

If you've been reading along as I've written, we're nearing the end. One last post is planned, and it's a doozy. I've lost track of the number of people who have said they might go to the GMC simply because of how much their church will save in apportionments. If that's you, the apportionments are not what you think they are. We'll also look at what I call "trust clause lite" in the GMC.

March 14, 2022

Buyer Beware: The GMC Book of Doctrines and Discipline, Pt. 8: Financial Implications

In this final post about the Global Methodist Church's (GMC) Book of Doctrines and Discipline (BDD), I'll look at some of the financial implications for churches that join. The reality is very different from what was originally promised, and should be considered by any church contemplating joining. As I've tried to say throughout the series, these are all cautions. From a theological and/or polity standpoint, you might find the risk well worth it. If that's you, I hope you simply move forward more informed.

Financial Implications

1. **"Trust Clause Lite"**: One of the reasons many churches are excited about the GMC is the promise of no trust clause - you really, truly own your own property. I think there are some legitimate reasons for a trust clause, but I also understand why this would be a strong motivator. The trust clause really only makes a difference if you want to leave a denomination, so from a practical standpoint it won't matter for the large majority of both GMC and UMC churches. If you do decide to leave the GMC, the absence of a trust clause will make departure much simpler - but not 100% simpler. Remember that the practical (not theological) reason for the trust clause today is financial. It's not possible to stop a church (defined as a worshipping community) from leaving. It is possible to make it costly, potentially leaving their building and all assets behind. 2553 in the UMC's Book of Discipline and 2548 both make it much easier (the latter easier than the former, which is why many GMC proponents are advocating for it). Under 2553, the cost to leave is a church's pension liability, two years of apportionments, and other requirements as determined by the Annual Conference (most Annual Conferences have no or very few additional requirements). 2548 has none of these requirements, but a change to 1054.23 mandates that churches disaffiliating in this way must also pay the unfunded pension. However, in the new BDD, 354.6 and 903.3 provide for what I call a "Trust Clause Lite". It is not a trust clause, but it functions in the same way. The denomination will hold a lien on every church's property, which will only be released when a church that chooses to depart has paid its unfunded pension in full. To be clear, this is an entirely necessary clause; I'm neither surprised nor disappointed that it is included. It's important to understand that, financially, this is identical to what the UMC currently has in 2548.

2. **Financial Support Outside the U.S.**: Recent General Conferences have asked those outside the U.S. to begin a process of providing financial support for our work together. The UMC will likely continue this. The GMC will not. At least for bishops, 505.2 says U.S. churches will pay for bishops in other countries.

3. **Apportionment Reality Part 1**: The remaining four points tell the fuller story on apportionments. With great fanfare, the GMC has shared that churches will have a dramatic reduction of apportionments. This is not necessarily true. First, in 349.4a, "General Church connectional funding" is limited to 1.5% of a local church's income. It is important to compare apples to apples. This is NOT the same thing as your current apportionments. This is accurately

compared to the portion of your current apportionments that go to the General Church. In my conference (Great Plains), this is currently 3.3% of local church income. This will still be a significant reduction for some churches - it's less than half the current rate. I encourage you to look at actual budget implications. In our conference, for example, what this really means is a savings of \$1,800 for every \$100,000 of income. It's not nothing - this is real money - but it's not nearly as significant as you might think at first.

4. Apportionment Reality Part 2: As we've seen in some previous posts, there's also no guarantee this will actually stay the same even on day 1. 349.5 gives the Transitional Leadership Council (TLC) authority to change this number with a 2/3 vote. Even before the first meeting of the new general conference your apportionments could go up. This is reaffirmed in 614.3

5. Apportionment Reality Part 3: The remainder of your apportionments are set by your Annual Conference. This is a little complicated. Feel free to check my math and assumptions. I'm confident but not positive that this is all correct.

- If you are part of an annual conference that chooses to leave (whether this is actually possible or not is debatable and will be decided by the Judicial Council this spring), 349.4c says **your apportionments don't change for up to five years**. Even then, they may not go down. Hypothetical: A Conference currently has total apportionments of 13.3% of local church income. 3.3% of income is for general church apportionments (see above) and the remaining 10% is for annual conference apportionments. Immediately when joining the GMC, your general church apportionments are reduced to 1.5%, but your remaining apportionments stay the same in perpetuity because they meet the threshold set by 349.4c.
- If you are **not** in a conference that leaves for the GMC in masse, 349.4b says your annual conference apportionments will be 5%, so your total will be 6.5%. **Note: This is the absolute lowest that you will pay in apportionments. It is most likely less than any apportionments now. It is also higher than the promised 5% that many churches are counting on.**
- The previous point also means that **two churches in the same conference could pay very different apportionments**. Hypothetical: The Texas Conference leaves for the GMC and the Central Texas conference does not. a Central Texas local church choose to go GMC. Their apportionments will be 6.5%. They are assigned by the GMC to the existing Texas Conference in the inevitable shuffling of conference boundaries. The Texas Conference keeps their apportionments, which are higher, the same but the church moving in from Central Texas is guaranteed to pay a lower rate.
- Even with all this, **the total cost to churches can still be deceiving**. Currently, some annual conferences apportion part of pensions. This amount is not to be included in apportionments and will be, for some conferences, an additional payment.
- One more hitch to the new system: Annual Conferences pay for their own bishops. This does not change the total amount of apportionments; **it shifts the burden from general to annual conference**. This means the 1.5% payable to the general church will stretch further while the portion you actually have control over and will most likely benefit you will not stretch as far. If my math is correct and using the Great Plains as an example, this means the apples to apples comparison of General Church apportionments is closer to a decrease from 2.8% to 1.5%. Simultaneously, expenses related to the annual conference's work would increase 5% without any corresponding benefit to the churches of the conference.

6. Your Money or Your (Church) Life: I've tried to be as objective as possible (knowing that I can't be 100% objective). On this one I just can't. There is a long history of traditionalist churches not paying their apportionments as an objection to denominational decisions. Another group of churches don't pay all their apportionments simply because they feel they can't afford to. Most churches pay some of their apportionments regularly but the bulk at the end of the year. **Every one of these churches can be kicked out of the denomination.** That's right. If you pay less than 100% of your apportionments (349.9), and even if you pay them in less than even monthly payments (349.6 sets monthly payments and 354 says you must follow all of 349) you can be "involuntarily disaffiliate[d]." This seems like blatant hypocrisy and power politics - withhold your apportionments today so that you can save money which we will then demand you pay us as part of the GMC.

This last point is a really good place to stop. If you've read this whole series you have hopefully seen moments of real objectivity and no doubt moments of opinion that you may well disagree with. I started with a few points that I actually really like about the BDD - some things that the UMC could learn from. As I close, I won't feign any kind of objectivity. The new book is called "Doctrines and Discipline." It is a law book. Grace is minimized, even eliminating the fullness of it in the baptismal vows. Diversity of opinion is frowned on, with churches and pastors that diverge even on social issues forcibly removed. I understand that many moving to the GMC believe our "big tent" church is too big of a tent. I disagree, but I understand. What I don't understand is how this "pup tent" church feels true to our theological history. I am theologically progressive on inclusivity of people who are LGBT+. I am centrist on almost every other theological issue. You won't find me arguing with the historical creeds or anything in our actual doctrinal statements. I've openly advocated for remembering the Wesleyan Quadrilateral really does put Scripture first, with three lenses that help us understand it instead of as four equal legs. If I were to go back in my own theological time to an era when I questioned but still affirmed our position on LGBT+ inclusion I believe I would still run from this new denomination. It is true that the current UMC is flawed and must be fixed. This new denomination, in my opinion, solves virtually none of our current problems and creates additional issues. I'd much rather work on the flawed system than ingrain a new denomination with this number of flaws from the start.