

Executive Summary

Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett visited the eight Districts in the North Alabama Conference during September and October 2017. During these visits she provided an update on the work of the Commission on a Way Forward and attendees participated in table discussions. [The PowerPoint Presentation](#) shows an overview of the information shared and questions discussed.

A total of approximately 1200 people, including both clergy and laity, attended the meetings. This is equivalent to less than 1% of the professing membership of the Conference and approximately 2% of the average weekly worship attendance. Participation was not mandatory. Not all congregations were represented and some congregations were represented by multiple attendees.

Prior to the table discussions, participants were informed that the input and insights of these discussions would be shared in a report to the Commission on a Way Forward and a summary of the discussions would be made available on the North Alabama Conference website.

Before entering into a time of table discussion, participants agreed to [a Table Covenant](#). During the discussions, responses were captured and submitted by a “recorder” selected by each table who took bullet point notes. Additionally, individual participants could offer input through note cards available at each table. The report to the Commission on a Way Forward and the Summary to the North Alabama Conference were compiled from the responses recorded and turned in during the discussions.

Each table discussion included five questions.

Question 1 included introductions and explored the participants’ current feelings toward the work of the Commission on a Way Forward. While some responses recorded expressed positive or unclear feelings regarding the Commission, the majority of responses expressed neutral or negative feelings.

Question 2 explored participants’ understanding of their congregation’s current feelings toward the UMC not ordaining persons who are in same-gender relationships and UMC clergy not officiating at weddings of same-gendered couples. The responses recorded expressed feelings indicating that the majority of discussion participants believe their congregation agrees with the current positions of the United Methodist Church.

Question 3 explored participants’ understanding of viewpoints differing from the majority of their congregation. Participants were asked to share the strengths and weaknesses they find in these differing viewpoints, as well as, where they identify common ground. Responses recorded indicated some common themes in each category. However, the majority of responses suggested that participants are not consistently in conversation with those with viewpoints different from the majority of their own congregation, as many responses did not answer the question presented.

Question 4 asked participants to name their fears related to the current impasse in the UMC. The most common responses recorded focused on the potential negative impact on the ministry of the UMC and denominational loyalty.

Question 5 encouraged participants to express how they hope the UMC denomination will find a way forward. The most common responses recorded indicated that participants are uncertain as to how the UMC can move forward.

Overview

During September and October 2017, all eight Districts of the North Alabama Conference hosted a gathering with Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett regarding the work of the Commission on a Way Forward. A total of approximately 1200 people attended the meetings.

Clergy and laity participated in the gatherings. Attendance was not mandatory, therefore all participants self-selected to attend. Not all congregations were represented during a discussion. Some congregations were represented by multiple attendees.

Participants came to the gatherings with different expectations. Some attended in order to hear the Bishop's update on the work of the Commission. Others came with an intention to have their voice and opinions heard regarding the work of the Commission and the future of the United Methodist Church. Still others came not having a clear understanding of the Commission's work or even the Commission's existence.

Note: No efforts were made to obtain an equal representation among persons of differing viewpoints. The views expressed in this summary are simply the views of those who chose to participate in the eight district discussions.

Process

During the time in each District dedicated to the discussion of the work of the Commission on a Way Forward, Bishop Wallace-Padgett provided an update based on publicly released reports and information. Following this update, attendees then participated in table discussions. This process was facilitated by Linda Holland, Conference Director of Connectional Ministries. The process included agreeing to a table covenant (www.umcna.org/files/fileshare/commission+on+way+forward/tablecovenant/sign.pdf) followed by discussion of a series of five questions. Each table had a "recorder" who took brief notes during the table discussion. These notes were collected and used to compile the full data set. Additionally, during the discussions, note cards were available on each table for participants who wanted to express statements which they did not feel comfortable speaking aloud for any reason. These cards were also aggregated into the data set.

In three Districts participants were encouraged to move to a table with people they did not know in order to hear potentially different perspectives during their discussion. However, the large crowd at one of these districts made that movement almost impossible. In five Districts, participants were not directly encouraged to mingle and tended to sit with people they already knew.

In evaluations of the discussions, 83% responded that no portion of the discussion process made them uncomfortable. The 17% who noted discomfort mentioned factors including never being involved in a discussion of this nature with their congregation, not feeling prepared to have such a discussion with others, the strong emotions and views people at their table expressed, holding a different opinion than the majority of persons at their table and not feeling heard or accepted.

Discussions Summary

Question 1 explored the participants' current feelings toward the work of the Commission on a Way Forward.

- **18% expressed positive feelings** with words such as hopeful, encouraged, trusting, supportive, cautiously optimistic, and needed.
- **39% expressed neutral feelings** with words such as curious, sympathetic, surprised, prayerful, questioning, and overdue
- **27% expressed negative feelings** with words such as skeptical, disappointed, worried, confused, lack of trust, and unnecessary
- **10 % expressed unclear feelings** with words such as distance, wandering, ignorance, why, foreign, and oblivious

An additional 6% provided responses that were not relevant to the question asked.

Question 2 explored participants' understanding of their congregation's current feelings toward the UMC not ordaining persons who are in same-gender relationships and UMC clergy not officiating at weddings of same-gendered couples.

- UMC not ordaining persons who are in same-gender relationships
 - 82% agree with this position
 - 18% disagree with this position
- UMC clergy not officiating at weddings of same-gendered couples
 - 80% agree with this position
 - 20% disagree with this position

54 total either unknown or non-responsive responses were received which are not included in these figures.

Question 3 explored participants' understanding of viewpoints differing from the majority of their congregation. They were asked to share the strengths and weaknesses they find in these differing viewpoints, as well as, where they identify common ground.

Those who note agreement with current positions of the *Book of Discipline*

- Express the **strengths** of those viewpoints which differ from their own as being inclusive, embracing diversity, coming from a place of love, not judging others, and offering grace.
- Express the **weaknesses** of those viewpoints which differ from their own as having a lack of scriptural justification, being too cultural, offering grace at the expense of holiness, bringing confusion, offering no defined boundaries, being selective in what they call a sinful lifestyle and coming from a different view of scripture.

Those who disagree with current positions of the *Book of Discipline*

- Express the **strengths** of those viewpoints which differ from their own as upholding an understanding of scripture, being passionate, having strong convictions, and offering grace but differing on what grace looks like.
- Express the **weaknesses** of those viewpoints which differ from their own as hateful, applying stereotypes, being judgmental, misinterpreting scripture, and being selective of what is labeled as sinful.

Participants with a variety of viewpoints expressed areas of common ground including accepting diversity, loving all people, agreeing to disagree, believing all are created in the image of God, all sides are sincere, all views think they are acting in love, compassion and grace, God's love, learning from one another, Love God, Love Jesus, Love Others, be welcoming to everyone and all are saved by the grace of God.

Some participants say there is no common ground and express opinions such as different viewpoints can't co-exist, this disagreement is a huge distraction, and this is the wrong emphasis for the church.

Question 4 asked participants to name their fears related to the current impasse in the UMC.

The fears most frequently mentioned include the following:

- The impact on the effectiveness of the UMC's ministry as a result of ongoing disagreements and/or potential outcomes
- Issues related to denominational unity
- Loss of people
- Theological concerns

Question 5 encouraged participants to express how they hope the UMC denomination will find a way forward.

The most common answer given was they are uncertain as to how the UMC can move forward.

The next most common concepts include the following:

- An emphasis on scriptural/theological principles
- Continued discernment and conversation
- Retaining the UMC's current stance
- A focus on the UMC's core mission

Many thanks to those who participated in the 2017 Fall District Days. The diverse range of input and insights shared through the table conversations are much appreciated.

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