



14th /03/2021

Inquiries to General Commission on General Conference and Council of Bishops on Special Called General Conference

A fortnight ago, the Commission on General Conference provided justifiable reasons to the global church about the impossibility of a virtual General Conference, thus necessitating a second postponement of the 2020 General Conference to August, 2022. Not long after, the Council of Bishops proposed a Special Called Virtual General Conference to address twelve legislative issues. This decision by the Council of Bishops is taken without any reference to the factors necessitating the impossible holding of a virtual Conference as clearly outlined by the General Commission on General Conference. We, the leaders of the UMC Africa Initiative are deeply concerned about the successful participation of African Delegates into the process without a response from our Bishops on how the challenges outlined by the Commission on General Conference would be addressed.

We are of the opinion that if these concerns are not addressed and the Special Called General Conference scheduled for 8th May is carried out, most African delegates would be disenfranchised. Such a precedence would not be good for our global church where the participation of every delegate to General Conference is indispensable to the process. We therefore kindly request a response from the Council of Bishops to the following impediments to holding a successful virtual General Conference outlined by the Commission on General Conference below, with our inserted comments and inquiries.

Impediments to Holding a Virtual General Conference.

• **Connectivity:** “Internet and even electricity is not readily available to everyone equitably in areas where The United Methodist Church is located,”. *This is absolutely true for us here in Africa. How can we have this Special Called Session without delegates from Africa being disenfranchised?*

- a) *Given the difficulty associated with securing stable electricity and internet connectivity in most parts of Africa, will the Council of Bishops or Commission on General Conference ensure that African delegates in each Episcopal Area are brought to a hotel or facility that has strong bandwidth to access internet in order to participate in the Special Called General Conference?*
- b) *Will the Council of Bishop or General Commission on General Conference underwrite the cost for delegates to commute from their towns and villages to safe and internet accessible venues to participate in the Special Called General Conference?*

- **Time zones:** “There is a 16-hour difference between the West Coast in the United States and the Philippines”. *The same is true for parts of Africa. How can we have a Special Called General Conference without Africa being marginalized?*

- **Interpretation:** “Nine languages are spoken at General Conference. Church law also requires that proposals and the proceedings be translated into four languages: English, French, Portuguese, and Kiswahili.” *If there are no debates or discussion to ensure that clarifications are provided, how would African delegates speaking different languages be helped to vote informedly?*

- **Legislative committees:** “Legislative committees are the first stop for most petitions submitted to General Conference, with only committee-approved legislation heading to the plenary for a vote by all delegates”. *Why should delegates render a “Yes” or “No” vote on a legislation without debating it? How would clarifications be sought if no discussions are held before a vote is taken?*
- **Safety and integrity of the voting process:** “The commission was already looking to enhance identification requirements after finding that at the contentious special 2019 General Conference, four ineligible people cast votes using the credentials of delegates who were not present”. *This allegation was laid squarely at the feet of African delegates when they were not in charge of validating delegates who received document as credible delegates to the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference. If a virtual Special Session is held.*
 - a) *How would the Council of Bishops or the General Commission ensure safety and integrity of the voting process?*
 - b) *Who is counting the paper ballots? How can we be sure that the ballots will be counted with integrity?*

- **Presiding officers:** “Presiding officers elected by delegates lead individual legislative committees, and bishops preside in plenary sessions.” For this anticipated Special Session scheduled for 8th May, “How will presiding officers be accommodated and where will they be located?” What languages will they speak to be heard and understood by every delegate?

- **Book of Discipline and General Conference rules:** “The Book of Discipline requires that General Conference must meet requirements laid out in the Discipline and set its own rules

that are approved by delegates.” This special called session denies delegates of this opportunity.

- **Christian conferencing:** The special called General Conference deprives delegates from participating in Christian conferencing. This has always been a healthy practice of our church.

. We are of the opinion that, without adequate response to these inquiries, it would be difficult if not impossible for African delegates to participate in the ensuing Special Called General Conference without being disenfranchised. This is a justice issue. We do not want to set wrong precedence that favors delegates from America and parts of Europe to the disadvantage of African and Philippines delegates. We therefore kindly request for a response to these inquiries before the May 8th Special Session of the General Conference.



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On behalf of the Leadership of the Initiative