

February 18, 2022

From: GC2020 First-elected & other General Conference delegates

To: Kim Simpson, Chair
Members, Commission on the General Conference

CC: Rev. Gary Graves, Secretary of the General Conference

Dear Commission Members:

Thank you for your service to The United Methodist Church and for your willingness to take on the difficult assignment of planning a global gathering in the midst of the ongoing uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that your task has not been easy. Please know that we, the undersigned General Conference delegates, are sending you encouragement and support, and that we will continue to hold you in prayer over the weeks and months ahead.

We also write to you with some urgency regarding the Commission's upcoming decision on when to hold the 2020 General Conference. We know that at this critical juncture, you are likely hearing from many individuals and groups, and that Commission members have already done much research on their own. Nonetheless, as a group representing General Conference delegates from the U.S. as well as the Central Conferences, we would be remiss if we did not also share our perspectives with you.

We strongly urge the Commission on the General Conference to postpone the General Conference until 2024, when it seems more likely that we could properly ensure the health, safety, and participation of all attendees, including delegates, bishops, observers, and invited guests, especially those traveling from outside the U.S. And while some have pushed the idea of a hybrid or "distributed" General Conference, we believe that requiring any kind of travel in 2022 poses significant health and safety issues and that we lack the technology and systems needed to ensure full, equitable participation from all parts of the world.

We have not come to these conclusions lightly or without careful consideration. We're aware that the General Conference has already been rescheduled twice, and we as delegates are eager to fulfill our elected roles and responsibilities. Nonetheless, especially because of the seriousness of the legislation that this General Conference will be debating, including the possibility of "amicable separation," it is important that the Commission on the General Conference err on the side of caution and ensure that no delegate, particularly those from Central Conferences, is precluded from full, in-person participation because of the ongoing COVID pandemic.

In calling for the postponement of the 2020 General Conference to 2024, we are mindful of the following concerns:

1. While the recent surge of the Omicron variant appears to be flattening in some parts of our global connection, this progress is uneven around the globe and there is much uncertainty whether there might be another wave of COVID infections. Additionally, while postponing the General Conference once again is not a guarantee, it does allow more time for the global pandemic to abate and increases the possibility that those in the Global South will be afforded greater access to vaccines. Furthermore, current guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control¹ and the Minnesota Department of Public Health² strongly recommend that people limit themselves to essential travel, both inside and outside of the U.S., that all travelers be vaccinated and, if possible, receive a booster shot to protect themselves from COVID-19 variants.

2. As you may have seen, Dr. David W. Scott, Mission Theologian for the General Board of Global Ministries, has pointed out in a recent article³, that proceeding with the General Conference in August/September of 2022 means that roughly one-third of elected delegates will not be in attendance due to long wait times for visa appointments and lengthy delay in visa processing and approvals.

Some of the current waiting times for visa appointments listed in the U.S. State Department's website clearly illustrate the challenge for Central Conference delegates: The current wait-time for a visa appointment is 850 calendar days in Abuja, Nigeria, 639 days in Manila, Philippines, 300 days in Kampala, Uganda, and 450 days in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. Additionally, there are currently no visa appointments available in Monrovia, Liberia; Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, or Moscow, Russia, except in cases of emergency⁴.

3. We are also deeply concerned about the vaccination initiative currently being led by the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) in which, according to multiple reports, delegates outside the U.S. are receiving up to \$700, purportedly to assist them in getting vaccinated. We concur with Central Conference Bishops⁵ and other church leaders from Africa⁶ who have decried this effort, and pointed out variously that (a) such tactics are grounded in colonialism, and specifically designed to exert undue influence on how votes will be cast and (b) that such tactics undermine soberly considered denominational efforts to combat vaccine hesitancy caused by mistrust and to promote equitable distribution worldwide.

We applaud Commission leaders for voicing similar concerns in a recent UM News article and strongly support your calls to protect the integrity of vaccine distribution efforts by public health departments and ministries and your raising the alarm about the potential for "perceived or real influence" on the voting at General Conference⁷. Additionally, we affirm those delegates who, because of their own integrity, have chosen not to accept such payments.

Because of these concerns, we urge the Commission to take the following actions:

1. Postpone the General Conference until 2024 for the reasons stated above.
2. Appoint a special task force, similar to previous efforts, to investigate the WCA's efforts to exert undue influence by offering direct cash payments to General Conference delegates outside the U.S.
3. Make your decision as soon as possible to give delegates, bishops, and denominational officials ample time to make preparations and plans, in respect to budgets, agency governance, apportionment stewardship, etc.

Thank you for listening to our concerns. We know that you are already fully aware of many of these issues, and we appreciate that you are earnestly wrestling with how best to proceed for the benefit of the entire Church.

As indicated at the beginning of this letter, please know that we are sending much support, encouragement, and prayers, not only for your upcoming meeting but for your time of service on the Commission on General Conference and beyond. May you be uplifted by Christ's abundant love!

Sincerely,

Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, first-elected clergy delegate, Michigan, NCJ
Dave Nuckols, first-elected lay delegate, Minnesota, NCJ
Kelly Carpenter, first-elected lay delegate, North Texas, SCJ
Rev. Kim Ingram, first-elected clergy delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Kuan, first-elected clergy delegate, California-Nevada, WJ
Jan Nelson, first-elected lay delegate, Oregon-Idaho, WJ
Rev. Byron Thomas, first-elected clergy delegate, North Georgia, SEJ
Molly McEntire, first-elected lay delegate, Florida, SEJ
Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, first-elected clergy delegate, Eastern PA, NEJ
Bethany Amey, first-elected lay delegate, Greater New Jersey, NEJ

Additional Signers

Derrick Scott III, lay delegate, Florida, SEJ
Rev. Dan Hurlbert, clergy delegate, Desert Southwest, WJ
Shandon Klein, lay delegate, North Texas, SCJ
Paul Gomez, lay delegate, Desert Southwest, WJ
Rev. Katie McKay Simpson, clergy delegate, Louisiana, SCJ
Ian Urriola, lay delegate, Upper New York, NEJ
Helen Ryde, lay delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Rev. Rebekah Sweet, clergy delegate, Upper New York, NEJ
Rev. Dr Lydia Munoz, clergy delegate, Eastern PA, NEJ
Rev. Deanna Stickley-Miner, clergy delegate, West Ohio, NCJ
Rev. David Livingston, clergy delegate, Great Plains, SCJ
Jennifer Davis, lay delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Rev. Josh Sherfey, clergy delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Bill Brownson, lay delegate, West Ohio, NCJ
Lynne Gilbert, lay delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Dr. Martha Banks, lay delegate, East Ohio, NCJ
Oliver Green, lay delegate, Great Plains, SCJ
Rev. Dr. James Howell, clergy delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Shirley Cauffman, lay delegate, Virginia, SEJ
Rev. Dr. In-Yong Lee, clergy delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Havaleh Havelka, lay delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Rev. Amy Coles, clergy delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Rev. Ande Emmanuel, clergy delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Southern Nigeria, Africa CC
Rev. Eli Sule Yakku, clergy delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Gwaten Nigeria, Africa CC
Jetai Pepsy, lay delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Southern Nigeria, Africa CC
Rev. Yahuda Zailani, clergy delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Gwaten Nigeria, Africa CC
Peter Ngai, lay delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Southern Nigeria, Africa CC
Japheth Aliyuda, lay delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Southern Nigeria, Africa CC
Rev. Dr. Danladi Balutu, clergy delegate, MOZAMBIQUE EPISCOPAL AREA - South Africa Provisional, Africa CC
Godwin Ibrahim, lay delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Gwaten Nigeria, Africa CC
Rev. Dr. Isa Dunah, clergy delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Pero Nigeria, Africa CC
Rev. Dr. Betty Kazadi Musau, clergy delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Mujing Mwad Honorine, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Rev. Karen Cook, clergy delegate, West Ohio, NEJ
Ilunga Dib Emmanuel, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC

Rev. Mumba Masimango Daniel, clergy delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - N. Katanga, Africa CC
 Kathi Mitchell, lay, GC reserve, Iowa, NCJ
 Rev. Robin Hynicka, clergy delegate, Eastern PA, NEJ
 Kabamba Kitenge Angel, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Patrick Ilunga Kilunji, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Rev. Camille Gaston, clergy delegate, North Texas, SCJ
 Didier Banza Banze, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Rev. Mwepu Məşhur Walasa, clergy delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Bwalya Masangu Enea, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Katongola Kayembe Joseph, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Rev. Mbayo Manolo Edouard, clergy delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Rev. Roger Grace, clergy delegate, West Ohio, NCJ
 Mutamba Kasongo Pierre, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA – Tanganyika, Africa CC
 Deaconess Olive Beltran, lay delegate, BAGUIO EPISCOPAL AREA - North Central Philippines, Philippines CC
 Rev. Alejandro Alfaro-Santiz, clergy delegate, Iowa, NCJ
 Rev. Sandra Olewine, clergy delegate, California-Pacific, WJ
 Jessica Vittorio, lay delegate, North Texas, SCJ
 J.J. Warren, lay delegate, Upper New York, NEJ
 Rev. David Hockett, clergy, GC Reserve, Western North Carolina, SEJ
 Rev. Dr. Cedrick Bridgeforth, clergy delegate, California-Pacific, WJ
 Rev. Molly Vetter, clergy, GC Reserve, California-Pacific, WJ
 Mark Stephenson, lay delegate, California-Pacific, WJ
 Bonnie Marden, lay delegate, New England, NEJ
 DS Orlino Veron, clergy delegate, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - Quezon City Philippines AC East, Philippines CC
 Rev. Matthew Pearson, clergy, GC Reserve, California-Nevada, WJ
 Rev. Vicki Walker, clergy, GC Reserve, Florida, SEJ
 Rev. Elizabeth Brick, clergy delegate, California- Nevada, WJ
 Rev. John Clarke Campbell-Evans, clergy delegate, Florida, SEJ
 CarleneJohnson née Fogle-Miller, lay delegate, Florida, SEJ
 MarthaGay Duncan, lay, GC Reserve, Florida, SEJ
 Kenneth Wolverton, lay delegate, North Texas, SCJ
 Alice Williams, lay delegate, Florida, SEJ
 Lonnie Chafin, lay delegate, Northern Illinois, NCJ
 Lilibeth Bolado, lay, GC Reserve, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - Bulacan Philippines AC, Philippines CC
 Rev. Allison Mark, clergy delegate, California-Pacific, WJ
 Rev. Sally Queen, clergy, GC Reserve, Western North Carolina, SEJ
 Rev. LizRoberts, clergy delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
 Rev. Sara Beth Pannell, clergy delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
 Home Missioner, Steve Taylor, lay delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
 Stephen Gardner, lay, GC Reserve, Florida, SEJ
 Rev. Igmedio C Domingo, clergy, GC Reserve, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - Philippines AC, Philippines CC
 Rev. Jaycee Salangsang, clergy, GC Reserve, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - Pampango AC, Philippines CC
 Rev. Egmedio Equila Jr, clergy, GC Reserve, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - South Nueva Ecija Philippines, Philippines
 Caleb Parker, lay delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
 Rev. Jonathan Ulanday, clergy delegate, DAVAO EPISCOPAL AREA - East Mindanao Philippines, Philippines CC
 Micheal Pope, lay delegate, California-Nevada, WJ
 Rev. Wendy Woodworth, clergy delegate, Oregon-Idaho, WJ

Shannon Priddy, lay delegate, Indiana, NCJ
Diane Brown, lay delegate, Michigan, NCJ
Rev. Dan Schwerin, clergy delegate, Wisconsin, NCJ
Kimberly Woods, lay delegate, Illinois Great Rivers, NCJ
Susan Graebe, lay delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
Dr. Judith Pierre-Okerson, lay delegate, Florida, SEJ
Rev. Joy Barrett, clergy delegate, Michigan, NCJ
Jennifer Peters, lay delegate, Michigan, NCJ
Nichea (Beverly) Guy, lay delegate, Michigan, NCJ
Anish Hermon, lay, GC Reserve, Illinois Great Rivers, NCJ
Rev. Corey Jones, clergy delegate, Florida, SEJ
Rev. Alka Lyall, clergy delegate, Northern Illinois, NCJ
Dr. Lucille Grace Hilario, lay delegate, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - Middle Philippines AC, Philippines CC
Rev. Marie Sol Villalon, clergy, GC Reserve, MANILA EPISCOPAL AREA - Southwest Philippines, Philippines CC
Rev. Kitenge Minaya Adolphe, clergy delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Kyoni Kazadi Bertine, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Banza Nshilba Francoise, lay, GC Reserve, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Kamwanga Marie Jose, lay, GC Reserve, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Mutombo Ilunga Stanislas, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Rev. Mutwale Ntambo, clergy delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Makasa Kyungu, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Ilunga Mbuyi Elisee, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
Rev. Dr. Autura Eason-Williams, clergy delegate, Memphis, SEJ
Joshua Shaw, lay delegate, Memphis, SEJ
Rev. Dr. Kabwita Kayombo Leo, clergy, GC Reserve, SOUTH CONGO EPISCOPAL AREA - South Congo, Africa CC
Laura Witkowski, lay delegate, Michigan, NCJ
Rev. Johnson Dodla, clergy delegate, Eastern PA, NEJ
Emily Lain, lay delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
Deaconess Emma Cantor, lay, GC Reserve, BAGUIO EPISCOPAL AREA-North Central Philippines, Philippines CC
Heather Pancoast, lay delegate, Florida, SEJ
Rev. Gregory Gross, clergy delegate, Northern Illinois, NCJ
Rev. Mary Klaehn, clergy, GC Reserve, Desert Southwest, WJ
Rev. Carter Ellis, clergy delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
Rev. Daryl Blanksma, clergy, GC Reserve, Oregon-Idaho, WJ
Julie O'Neal, lay, GC Reserve, Desert Southwest, WJ
Rev. Anthony Tang, clergy, GC Reserve, Desert Southwest, WJ
Rev. Dan Bryant, clergy delegate, East Ohio, NCJ
Noah Spicer, lay, GC Reserve, New England, NEJ
Rev. Sandra Bonnette-Kim, clergy, GC Reserve, New England, NEJ
Rev. Dr. Giovanni Arroyo, clergy delegate, Baltimore-Washington, NEJ
Rev. Dr. Armando Arellano, clergy delegate, East Ohio, NCJ
Nadia Kanhai, lay delegate, Northern Illinois, NCJ
Dr. Ralph Oduor, lay delegate, New England, NEJ
Rev. Dr. Hwa-Young Chong, clergy, GC Reserve, Northern Illinois, NCJ
Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, clergy delegate, Baltimore-Washington, NEJ
Claire Holston, lay, GC Reserve, New England, NEJ
Tracy Collins, lay, GC Reserve, Baltimore-Washington, NEJ

Rev. Timothy Riss, clergy delegate, New York, NEJ
 Rev. Denise Smartt Sears, clergy delegate, New York, NEJ
 Dr. Solomon Christian, lay, GC Reserve, Memphis, SEJ
 Rev. Austin Adkinson, clergy, GC Reserve, Pacific Northwest, WJ
 Rita L Smith, lay, GC Reserve, Northern Illinois, NCJ
 Rev. DJ del Rosario, clergy, GC Reserve, Pacific Northwest, WJ
 Rev. Joe Kim, clergy, GC Reserve, Pacific Northwest, WJ
 Rev. Donna Pritchard, clergy, GC Reserve, Oregon-Idaho, WJ
 Rev. Dr. Becca Girrell, clergy delegate, New England, NEJ
 Frederick Brewington, lay delegate, New York, NEJ
 Ngoy Kasole alexis, lay delegate, NORTH KATANGA EPISCOPAL AREA - North Katanga, Africa CC
 Deaconess Gail Douglas-Boykin, lay delegate, New York, NEJ
 Safiya Amos Davidson, lay delegate, NIGERIA EPISCOPAL AREA - Gwaten Nigeria, Africa CC
 Rev. Cheryl Jefferson Bell, clergy delegate, Great Plains, SCJ
 Rev. Dr. Stephen Handy, clergy delegate, Tennessee, SEJ
 Dr. Emanuel Cleaver III, clergy delegate, Missouri, SCJ
 Rev. Raquel Feagins, clergy delegate, Rio Texas, SCJ
 Rev. James Amerson, clergy delegate, Rio Texas, SCJ
 Linda Linfors, lay delegate, Western North Carolina, SEJ
 Brant Henshaw, lay, GC Reserve Pacific Northwest, WJ
 Rev. Amie Stewart, clergy delegate, North Carolina, SEJ
 Rev. Jenny Arneson, clergy delegate, Wisconsin, NCJ
 Rev. Dr. Jay Williams, clergy delegate, New England, NEJ
 Uchenna Awa, lay, GC Reserve, New England, NEJ
 Américo Nhassengo, lay delegate, MOZAMBIQUE EPISCOPAL AREA - Mozambique North, Africa CC
 Dr. Randall Miller, lay, GC Reserve, California-Nevada, WJ
 Ana Maria Rodriguez Alfonso, lay, GC Reserve, New England, NEJ
 Karen Prudente, lay, GC Reserve, New York, NEJ
 Rev. Leigh Goodrich, clergy, GC Reserve, New England, NEJ
 Rev. Paul Perez, clergy delegate, Michigan, NCJ
 Rev. Markus Jung, clergy delegate, GERMANY EPISCOPAL AREA - Germany South, Europe CC

Footnotes:

1. CDC COVID Travel Recommendations by Destination, Updated January 31, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/map-and-travel-notice.html>
2. Minnesota Department of Public Health, Protect Yourself & Others: COVID-19, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html>.
3. "Up to a Third of Delegates Won't Get Their Visas in Time," Dr. David W. Scott, February 4, 2022, <http://www.umglobal.org/2022/02/up-to-third-of-general-conference.html?m=1>
4. U.S. State Department Website, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/wait-times.html>.
5. "Visa Appointment Wait Times," "Central Conference bishops appalled by WCA's actions on vaccine offers," Council of Bishops' Press Release, 1/17/22, <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/central-conference-bishops-appalled-by-wca-on-vaccine-offers-15852087>.
6. "The Human Costs of General Conference," Longe, Nyarota, and Mwita, United Methodist Insight, January 11, 2022, <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/the-human-cost-of-general-conference-in-2022/>
7. Bishops, others denounce the WCA's vaccination," Heather Hahn, UM News, Jan. 18, 2022, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishops-others-denounce-wcas-vaccine-plan>.