

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE 11

LOCAL CHURCH

Renewal and Reform Coalition (RRC)
Priority petitions in bold italics

CHURCH PROPERTY

In the current climate of polarization within The United Methodist Church, questions have been raised about the possibility of separation. Local churches on both sides of the question of homosexuality and marriage have voted to leave the denomination. This has been handled by each annual conference on a case by case basis, leading to inconsistency in how these situations are treated. These two petitions propose ways of standardizing the handling of churches desiring to leave the denomination. We believe that covenant cannot be coerced, and that churches that are unwilling to live within the boundaries of our covenant ought to have the freedom to leave the denomination with their property without undue penalty. Many laypersons believe it is unfair that the denomination should be able to keep the church's property in that case, since it is the local members who built it and provide the upkeep. Allowing frustrated churches who are unwilling to continue supporting our denominational covenant to exit may relieve the pressure of conflict and allow the denomination to refocus its energy on its mission.

Pet 60811 ***Page 1043*** ***Disaffiliation*** ***Support***

This petition provides a process of exit for congregations who are "in irreconcilable conflict for reasons of conscience with the provisions of *The Book of Discipline* ... on the practice of homosexuality and the blessing of homosexual unions." It is thus limited only to churches who cannot accept United Methodist teaching and requirements around these issues. Such congregations are now increasingly engaged in disobedience to the *Discipline* because of their conscientious position. Exit would require a period of study and discernment, a two-thirds vote of the church conference, and the local church assuming all debts. The local church could then keep its property. We would be open to adding to this petition the additional requirements that Petition 60812 would impose on departing congregations.

Pet 60812 ***Page 1044*** ***Disaffiliation*** ***Consider***

This petition is similar to the first, except that the reason for leaving is a bit broader. In light of the "deep conflict over the church's position on the practice of homosexuality and the blessing of homosexual unions," a church could leave if "for reasons of conscience, witness, or mission it can better serve Christ and his kingdom by not being affiliated with The United Methodist Church." This petition would allow churches who feel strongly on either side of the question to depart, if they felt they could not longer conscientiously serve within United Methodism. In addition to the requirements imposed by the first petition, this petition also requires the local church to repay to the annual conference money invested by the conference in the local church during the previous five years and to pay one additional year's apportionment in full.

HOMOSEXUALITY

The church's balanced, compassionate, and biblically faithful position on the practice of homosexuality has been reaffirmed by ten General Conferences over 40 years. Despite vociferous disagreement by some parts of the church, it still represents the majority opinion of the grass roots church membership worldwide. Changing the church's position to allow same-sex weddings and/or the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals would separate our church from 2,000 years of the church's consensus

teaching and from 95 percent of world Christians today. It would also provoke separation of The United Methodist Church, forcing those who could not in good conscience live with the progressive position to leave the church. We oppose any efforts to remove or weaken the teachings and requirements of our church around marriage and sexuality.

Pet 60839 Page 1041 Responsibilities of S/PPRC Oppose

This petition mandates a non-discrimination policy for lay staff based on “age, race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or marital status.” Such broad language could mandate that churches hire practicing homosexuals, transgender persons, and unmarried cohabiting heterosexual persons as lay staff. It would open the local church to increased legal liability to being sued over employment decisions. Congregations could be forced to hire and promote people who do not ascribe to the congregation’s values. Including “gender identity” as a category is an implicit affirmation that a person’s gender is based on one’s own feelings, rather than biological reality, and that gender can be changed. Our statement on inclusiveness is already found in ¶ 4 of the constitution and in ¶ 140, so there is no need to reiterate it here in a way that opens up legal liability for the congregation.

WOMEN’S MINISTRY

The importance of various forms of women’s ministry in the local church is unquestioned. Unfortunately, the *Discipline’s* support for United Methodist Women as the primary ministry for women has led pastors, superintendents, and bishops in some areas to oppose or even prohibit any other form of women’s ministry. These two petitions emphasize the importance of women’s ministry and open the door to a variety of formats in addition to UMW being able to function well in the local church.

Pet 60614 Page 1038 Supplemental Ministries Support

This petition encourages supplemental ministry programs for women and men in addition to United Methodist Women and United Methodist Men.

Pet 60844 Page 1050 Women’s Ministry Support

This resolution lifts up the importance of women’s ministry in the local church and encourages local churches to provide supplemental women’s ministry programs that fit the unique needs of women in each church.

LEADERSHIP STANDARDS

It is important that local church leaders affirm the teachings of our denomination, so that the ministry and mission of the local church can be unified around a common foundation of essential matters. Since we require local church leaders to be “loyal to the ethical standards ... in the Social Principles,” we should also require leaders to affirm our doctrinal teachings, as well.

Pet 60713 Page 1037 Church Council Support

Pet 60714 Page 1037 Powers and Duties of the Charge Conference Support

This petition would require the church leadership to “promote awareness of and concurrence with the Doctrinal Standards and General Rules.” This will improve the theological literacy in our congregations.

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Pet 60607 Page 1035 Membership Support

This petition makes explicit in the *Discipline* what has been affirmed by the Judicial Council, that pastors can exercise discernment about a person’s readiness to assume the vows of membership. It is important to provide an avenue of appeal in order to protect against the

abuse or capricious use of pastoral authority. The right of appeal is enshrined in ¶ 20 of our Constitution. The P/SPRC is the body best equipped to handle these appeals, since they are used to dealing with confidential personal information, and the committee is intended to be representative of the congregation's breadth and diversity.

Pet 60071 Page 1036 Accountability Support
This petition enhances the fact that members are accountable for the vows they take at baptism and profession of faith. It creates the foundation for a higher expectation of membership.

Pet 60021 Page 1036 Accurate Membership Statistics Consider

Pet 60022 Page 1036 Accurate Membership Statistics Support

Pet 60023 Page 1036 Accurate Membership Statistics Support

These petitions aim to make the church membership statistics more accurate by mandating that persons who are no longer active (without reason) in the local church be removed from membership. Membership statistics in many congregations do not reflect the actual people who are active and supportive in the life of the church. Pastors in some regions have been openly encouraged to dishonestly "pad" their membership numbers in order to help their area take more denominational leadership slots which are assigned proportionally to membership. On the other hand, there are times when pastoral discretion is needed to keep a person on the roll of members. Petition 60021 mandates the inactive member's removal, while petitions 60022 and 60023 only mandate that the member be recommended for removal. Such recommendation is still subject to the approval of the charge conference.

ORGANIC JURISDICTIONAL SOLUTION

This petition is part of a set of petitions being handled by Committee 3, Conferences, and we recommend that it be referred there to be dealt with together. This is a comprehensive plan to allow each jurisdiction to set its own standards for ministry, which would allow some jurisdictions to permit same-sex weddings and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. This plan would also allow local churches to affiliate with a different annual conference, annual conferences to affiliate with a different jurisdiction, and jurisdictions to change their boundaries to include churches that want to affiliate with them. The Renewal and Reform Coalition believes that allowing jurisdictions to set their own standards would lead to a slow-motion splintering of the church and would not resolve the conflict over the church's stance on sexuality and marriage. We oppose parts of the Organic Jurisdictional Solution that would allow that. We do see merit, however, in giving congregations the flexibility to switch to a different annual conference with which they more closely align in theology and/or culture. We also favor giving annual conferences the flexibility to switch to a different jurisdiction for the same reason. We believe this move could lessen conflict and tension within annual conferences and lead to healthier functioning. It would assist congregations who feel theologically isolated and misunderstood in their current annual conference.

Pet 61009 Page 1042 Organic Jurisdictional Solution – Transfer Procedures for Churches Support

This petition would allow a congregation to transfer to another annual conference in which it may not be geographically located.

Further information on these and other issues facing the 2016 General Conference may be found on the RRC website: www.methodistcrossroads.org