

Transcript for March 9 interview about General Conference postponement with the Rev. Tom Berlin

Madeline White:

So the Commission on General Conference shared last week, the decision to further postpone the 2022 General Conference until 2024. And so this has provided arenas of questions, and really next steps, what does this mean for us? So the Reverend Tom Berlin is with us, who amongst other titles, he is the lead clergy delegate of our Virginia delegation to General Conference. So Tom, thank you for being with us to help clarify kind of what's next for us.

Tom Berlin:

Yeah. Happy to do it, Maddie. And I really hope it'll be helpful to clergy and to lay leaders in our local churches who are trying to communicate and interpret all this. Anything we can do to help those folks is a worthwhile effort.

Madeline White:

Yeah. So I also want to highly encourage our members who are watching this, that Tom has already created two very helpful resources already. On his public Facebook page, he provided an overview of the General Conference postponement. He also had an interview with Bishop Tom Bickerton of the New York Episcopal area. And he is also a non-voting member on the Commission on General Conference. So they had a really great conversation. So Tom, to follow up on that conversation you had with Bishop Bickerton, can you talk about your take on the decision that was ahead of the Commission, and also the complex work that led into their decision?

Tom Berlin:

Yes. Maddie, they created a few months ago, they created criteria for themselves on how they would make this decision. It's a huge decision to postpone a General Conference, and especially when it's going to end up being a four year total postponement. There's a lot happening in the United Methodist Church. As we all know, there are a number of United Methodist Churches around the country that are hoping to depart. There's a Global Methodist Church that wants to form a new denomination, with those who are incompatibilist.

Tom Berlin:

There are people related to LGBTQ inclusion, believe that if anyone in the country has the same gender marriage, they don't want to be in that church. If any gay person is ordained, they'd don't want to be in that church. There are other issues as well with that, I want to be fair to the totality of that discussion. But these are the two presenting issues that were major in 2019 at the General Conference.

Tom Berlin:

And even though the incompatibilist won all the legislation in 2019, they want to leave. So holding that General Conference was important to them, because there was a piece of legislation called "The Protocol of Grace and Reconciliation through Separation." I and others participated in that protocol agreement with Ken Feinberg, who's a major well known mediator in America. And it was legislation that we hoped would sort of clarify what the processes would be. For that reason, that group was

putting a lot of pressure on the commission to hold the General Conference. And others in the church said, "Well, wait a minute, we're concerned that we want to make sure everyone can participate."

Tom Berlin:

So the Commission on General Conference, who has the responsibility of deciding postponement or not, they made a set of criteria. And one aspect of that criteria was global participation. They wanted delegates from Africa, Europe, the Philippines in Asia, and the United States, to all be able to equally participate. So as we've heard from them, their biggest fear is, there were three criteria. One criteria was, are people vaccinated? Because without a vaccination for the pandemic, you can't get into the US. Second, can you get a visa? Third, can you get a negative COVID test 24 hours before you get on the airplane? Which is a current requirement.

Tom Berlin:

The condition that they felt failed were the visas. Now, some of the incompatible groups have stated that they didn't do a good job, they could have gotten the visas, had they started earlier. I have members of the church I serve at Floris United Methodist up here in Northern Virginia who actually work for the state department. And I've reached out to them, and they have confirmed, that in many parts of the world, especially on the continent of Africa, there is a tremendous backlog because of the pandemic. A tremendous backlog of applications for US visas. And people in other sectors of our economy, aren't able to get in either. Business people aren't able to make those trips as they would like. People who are coming to us to visit relatives aren't able to get here as they would like right now.

Tom Berlin:

The commission stated that there was an over 800 day waiting period for those visas at this time in many countries. And they estimated that a third of our delegates from Africa and other parts of the world would not be able to arrive. A third is a big percentage. So the criteria that failed then, was the criteria related to equity, the ability to have a representative group of delegates from all over the world, et cetera. So anyway, that's the basis of the decision. Incompatibilist groups have put out a lot of statements stating their disappointment with that and the feeling that the Commission didn't work hard enough. And I think everybody's got a right to hold their own opinions. But as I've reached out to people who work for the state department, or who used to work in very high echelons of the state department, they've simply validated what our Commission said.

Tom Berlin:

So I don't think there's a conspiracy here. I don't think this is an attempt to not deal with the protocol. I think that we have an obligation to our delegates around the globe, that when we hold a General Conference, they should participate. That's what the Commission's saying. And I think that's a fair statement. I'll tell you this, Maddie, in the past, these incompatible groups have won every decision related to LGBTQ inclusion because most delegates from Africa agree with them. So it seems odd that in a year when we've identified that visas won't be available to those from Africa, the incompatibilist groups still want to hold a general conference without their friends who have been so helpful to them in the past. I'm observing that as an odd thing to do. But anyway, it doesn't matter, the Commission's already stated that it's postpone.

Madeline White:

Yeah. And one of the things that I thought was interesting that I hadn't thought about, you and Bishop Bickerton talked about whether this can really be qualified as a postponed or canceled General Conference. Because if folks will remember, we were supposed to have the General Conference 2020. We had the pandemic so that was then postponed to 2021. And then it was postponed to 2022. Well, now with this recent postponement to 2024, it comes up alongside a general conference that we would've already had. So can you kind of talk about that nuance?

Tom Berlin:

Yeah, sure can. And, and Maddie, I'm sorry, I don't have my books of legislation right here, because I'd love to show them to folks. But when you're a delegate to General Conference, you get what looks like the old phone books. Remember when we got phone books, and in a Metro area they'd be about this thick. I have two booklets of legislation that are this thick. Now if the General Conference is postponed, then all of that legislation is still in play and we'll deal with it in 2024. And people will be able to submit other legislation if they desire as well.

Tom Berlin:

If it's postponed, the delegates that Virginia elected back in what 2018, 2019, I guess 2019, will be the delegates for 2024. However, if it's actually canceled, then that legislation will all go away and new legislation will have to be submitted. All the delegates selected back in 2019 will simply not have served in a general conference. And we'll have to elect all new delegates in a year before the general conference. Now, the Commission on the General Conference to my understanding, doesn't have the ability to cancel a General Conference.

Tom Berlin:

We're in uncharted waters here. We've never had a global pandemic. We've never had this happen to a General Conference in the history of our met United Methodist Church. So the judicial council, which is like the Supreme Court of the Methodist church, the Commission on General Conference will reach out to the judicial council and say, "Hey, could you make a ruling? Is it postponed? Or is it canceled?" And once they make the ruling, then the Commission on General Conference will respond. And when I say respond, they'll say to the rest of us, "Hey, it's postponed or it's canceled." And then we'll go from there. And, frankly, these are just difficult things that a pandemic brings and the sky's not falling on those, we just need a ruling.

Madeline White:

Yeah. So do you foresee Tom, that there's just a lot that the judicial council is going to have to rule on first, before we have more clarity?

Tom Berlin:

Yes. That's exactly right. We've got to wait for the ruling. And we'll probably wait for weeks not months, and we will definitely not wait for years. I mean, I think judicial council will probably do this in the months ahead. I don't know when, I don't have a date, no one I've spoken to has given a date. But I think we can be patient for a few months while that group gets together and confers. But the Commission will, I think, be asking them to do that. And then there are questions related to jurisdictional conferences that are all connected is to this as well. That's where bishops are elected.

Tom Berlin:

And the Council of Bishops yesterday sent some questions to the judicial council related to when and whether those can be held. So the judicial council is really important. And here's what's great, in your United Methodist Church, we actually have a system that can figure this out in a fair inequitable way. That's why we have the Commission on General Conference. That's why we have the judicial council. And once these groups, as the commission just recently said, "Hey, it's postponed." And now the question is, is it canceled or postponed? We've got a system. But for many of us it's difficult because patience is required.

Madeline White:

Tom, you spoke a little bit about the legislation, and I know that you were a part of the team that put together "the Protocol." Do you foresee that's going to still be legislation before 2024?

Tom Berlin:

Oh, I think whether it's postponed, or whether it's been a cancellation and new legislation has to be submitted, I think it absolutely will come back. I don't know if it'll pass, or fail, or be modified. It could have what I would call death by amendment. The difficulty now is a lot of water's gone under the bridge time wise. And make no mistake, it's hard for a new denomination to start, and people recruit churches out of the United Methodist Church to join it without creating some ill will. And things have been written and said about our United Methodist church, that many of us find offensive. And so those dynamics affect how delegates show up to vote on things.

Tom Berlin:

So I think the legislation will be resubmitted as my guess. It also may be resubmitted in other forms. Other people may try to amend it and then submit it as an amended version so that the legislative committee that works with it will have to consider all that together. The protocol was a mediated agreement between traditionalists who are incompatible, and then everybody else who is compatibilists. It included bishops, it included laity, it included clergy, and it included people from our worldwide denomination. And many from the United States who were actually in the room when it was negotiated.

Tom Berlin:

Ken Feinberg told us that "You know you've done a good mediation when everybody walks out feeling like they lost something, and everybody walks out feeling like they got something. I know I walked out feeling like I had lost a lot in the discussion. There were things I didn't want in the protocol. Keith Boyette, who's also in the Virginia conference, but who is starting this new Global Methodist church. He stated, I assume it's true, he said it was true. He stated that he felt that he had lost some things in the negotiation. Well, that's a sign of a good negotiation.

Tom Berlin:

So the difficulty is, if you alter that, you're no longer in a mediated agreement. So the process will allow delegates to amend, but they won't be able to amend and still have the same negotiated agreement. So Maddie, hard to predict where that's going to go. I think more importantly, there are a lot of United Method Churches, especially in the Southeast and the South Central. Places like Mississippi, Alabama, South Georgia, that want to leave our system, Texas, Oklahoma. And they've announced that in Florida there are churches that want to leave. I think that those churches already have the ability to do so. We have two disciplinary paragraphs that are already built in the book of discipline. And bishops, I think are

doing a really reasonable job of talking to those churches now, helping them to discern if that's what they want to do. What they gain, what they lose. So far, most of the United Methodist Churches who have left have not joined any other denomination, they have become an independent church. So, that can happen.

Madeline White:

So I'm mindful Tom, that we have different audiences who are listening to us talk when we talk about what's been going on at the denominational level. So we have our very connected clergy and laity who know what have been happening at the General Conference level prior to 2019. So I would ask, how do we kind of hold these different audiences in tandem? Our really connected clergy and laity, but also just our laypeople in the pews who are doing the work at the local church level, they read the stuff in the press, and they wonder, what's going on with my church? I didn't know that this is happening. So how do we kind of speak to those two different audiences?

Tom Berlin:

We've got a lot going on in the world right now. We've got a major war in the Ukraine that is unjust. We have a lot of things in the national news, inflation. Our communities are under different pressure. And as a US citizen and a world citizen, I read enough news to be informed, but not so much as to be full of anxiety. I encourage United Methodists to do that with their church right now. Here's the good news. If you're in the average United Methodist Church in Virginia, there is no decision coming your way. You don't have to vote on anything, you don't have to decide anything, there's no big decision that you're required to make. We are United Methodist. We continue to be United Methodist.

Tom Berlin:

So the church I serve, Floris United Methodist Church, we're very focused on our community. We're having a church council meeting in person on Saturday. We're going to do a day long planning meeting. We're going to talk about experiments we want to run to bring people to know Christ, to help restore our sense of community, which has been broken up a little bit by the pandemic. And how we can keep our community in love. We've done a lot of food distribution. We have a very active partnership with an elementary school, and we really work on helping at-risk children in our community. So Maddie, nothing has changed. Nothing's changed about that. So during that day long meeting from nine to three, we're devoting 10 minutes to responding to anybody's questions about General Conference. So six hour meeting, 10 minutes goes to this.

Tom Berlin:

Now I've been working to try to put information into the system because I think people deserve transparency and good information, and it's easy to get that to you. I would avoid reading, if you're a United Methodist and you want to stay United Methodist, I would avoid reading things that the incompatibilists write. These different coalition groups who have already said, "We plan to leave and join the GMC, the Global Methodist Church." I sometimes forget what that stands for, the Global Methodist Church.

Tom Berlin:

Again, we're adults. We get to self differentiate. If there are churches that want to leave, that's great. I don't need to carry anxiety about other people's decisions. That's one of the great things about being an adult, is you figure out, you know what, I'm here doing my thing. I'm sharing Christ. I'm making sure kids

are fed meals. I'm bringing people deeper in their discipleship, and I'm restoring the fellowship of our church after a year long pandemic.

Tom Berlin:

And Maddie, the average United Methodist Church has been far more impacted by the pandemic than by everything you and I have been talking about for about 20 minutes now. All this happening, and the churches that want to leave and all that. It's nothing compared to what the pandemic's done to us. In the next two weeks, we're still doing, at the church I serve, funerals related to people who have died of COVID. I mean, quite frankly, with all due respect to the folks who want to leave, I've got bigger fish to fry. I've got that I'm caring for who are still losing people to COVID. And one of these was an elderly member of our church who was just a delight to all of us. And we're all just so sad she's gone.

Tom Berlin:

So I would say, back to your original question. If you're a United Methodist and you want to remain one, pray for your church, there are people that are going to sort all this out. Probably isn't going to affect your local congregation, focus on your ministry, because rebuilding our ministry after the pandemic, that's the work that we've got to focus on right now. And it's a joyful work, and it's the work we're called to. The anxiety you may hear, all the back and forth and, oh my goodness, some of the writing that's being done over here is really something I just don't enjoy reading. Because frankly, I think a lot of it's not accurate, I think it's polemic.

Tom Berlin:

There's conspiracy theory about this Commission on General Conference. Look, you can either get visas or you can't, period. Folks I talk to work in the state department say you can't in many places, they agree. So it's just not a conspiracy. I'm sorry you didn't get the protocol, I worked on the protocol. I wanted everybody to have an easy way out. But you know what? I trust our Bishop and our cabinet in Virginia to work with these churches in ways that are fair and just. Help them pay their unfunded pension liability and their other pension liability as they go. And then receive their property in kind. And to do that in a discerning prayerful manner, if that's what they ultimately desire. But that's a congregational conversation. I'm really glad I'm not in a church that's worried about that.

Madeline White:

Well, I really appreciate that, Tom. Because like you said, I think the pandemic has definitely been the bigger focus for our local churches. Obviously, because our clergy, you're one of our clergy, have had to pivot throughout this pandemic over and over again. Care for yourself, care for your congregation. And I would hope that especially with the times to come, that we can rediscover that joy of ministry and that's where our focus can be. And so I appreciate your almost permission giving of, let go of the anxiety, we have things to do. And that is discipleship making, and that is our ministry, Tom, before we go, is there anything else that you want our clergy and laity to know when we think about General Conference? When you think about the work that's ahead of you and the delegation.

Tom Berlin:

Yeah. I would just want you to know that our delegation will continue to be diligent about this work. We've got a meeting by Zoom next week, just talk about a couple things related to all this. I want to make sure the delegation understands fully what's going on. As there is news, we share it. As soon as the commission work came out, I drove back into my office and made a video because I wanted people

in Virginia to understand. I posted them on my Facebook so it'd be very public if people wanted see it. I appreciate what you're doing because those who don't have access to social media, or have chosen not to have access to social media, we want them to have pathways to receive that information. So thank you for this.

Tom Berlin:

Maddie, I know this is sort of a personal illustration. Ash Wednesday services at Floris United Methodist Church, were the first services we had where we lowered our restriction on masking. We said it's mask optional. We had more people show up for that special service than we've had in a few years at any service like that. Now we've had Sunday morning services that large. But people were incredibly joyful. Maddie, I had people walking up to me on Ash Wednesday saying I am so excited to see everyone. I am so joyful, but I feel bad that it's Ash Wednesday, and I feel like ought to feel bad on Ash Wednesday.

Tom Berlin:

I guess what I want to say is, I hope that's your experience at church right now. Having people in Northern Virginia where we've had mass restrictions, and we've really been doing the work, like everybody else. There's a lot of joy right now for us. And gosh, I feel so good about all the food we gave away, we started holding blood mobiles at our church when the Red Cross said they were short of blood. We said, our members will give you their blood. Think about that. So we have done some things that we wouldn't have done without the pandemic, and we're going to keep doing them now. It's a great time to be a United Methodist. That's the thing I want you to hear.

Tom Berlin:

Listen, this General Conference work, it's important. Those that are elected to do the work that you've given that responsibility, I want you to know that they're representing you well, and they're doing the work, and they're doing it with a good heart. Listen, some of these people leaving are dear friends of mine. I've got friends in other conferences that are going to choose to leave. Not in Virginia, but in other conferences that are going to choose to leave. And I'm really going to miss them. And yet I celebrate the adult ability to self differentiate and do the thing you need to do. I just don't think you need to do it in a way that's ugly. I don't think it has to be war. I just think we need to work it out. And there are Bishops that I speak to, and I spoke to one yesterday in another conference. They're working it out, they're doing their best.

Tom Berlin:

So I think if we hold each other in that light, and try to look for the best in each other, we're going to be able to see it. Because the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to do that. So with a heart of peace, and with a desire to serve Jesus, I think we continue marching forward. Nothing's really easy these days, right? Hadn't anything easy for how many years? Six years. And yet ministry continues to happen because Christ is our Lord.

Madeline White:

That's wonderful. Thank you for leading us on that note, Tom. And I appreciate so much your time.

Tom Berlin:

Oh yeah. Maddie, thank you. Thanks for keeping us connected. And we'll keep at it.

