
Mountain Sky Conference

Focus Group Sessions - Preliminary Report

Pathways Team - December 5, 2019



Moving Toward God's Good Future

Introduction

During the 2019 annual meeting of the Mountain Sky Conference we resolved to help guide the body through the many different scenarios we might face so that we can make decisions in an informed manner having heard from many people and places across our area.

To that effect, the plan development was to include listening sessions as a means to interactively communicate the various pathways being explored. The format included a PowerPoint with short video presentations by Bishop Karen Oliveto, Rev. Dawn Skerritt, Rev. Kent Ingram, and Rev. Calvin Hill each followed by a series of questions and time for discussion. Each session was facilitated by a Pathways team member and/or conference delegate and local clergy and lay leaders as available. The intent of the sessions was to focus on creating understanding and enthusiasm for the pathways being explored and suggested and to help build a unity of purpose and vision. The information being collected is shared with the Pathways team and delegates for consideration in their work.



Focus Group Sessions

Purpose

This preliminary Pathways report is based on a brief, high level review of the 18 reports so far submitted following the Focus Sessions held during November 2019. Information from a separate report form for facilitators (delegates report) has not been included in this review since it was not available at this time. The participant count so far is in excess of 700 persons.

It should be noted that this preliminary report has not been fully reviewed by the entire Pathways team and is being shared with the Roundtable in advance for your preliminary considerations and information. Once we have had the opportunity to fully digest the whole body of responses (there are 30+ Focus Sessions scheduled), the Pathways Team intends on submitting a findings and recommendations report for your consideration.

Preliminary Findings

We believe the overall reaction to the Focus Sessions has been very positive. While they have sometimes been contentious as people grapple with the realities of the future of the United Methodist Church and more particularly of the Mountain Sky Conference, they have also shown the spirit of some of our most defining qualities inclusiveness, respectfulness, and genuine compassion about the future of our denomination.

The reports from the individual sessions collected a large and unfiltered amount of information. Participants were made aware that this was a primary means of collecting feedback and hence included constructive comments and in some instances, raw emotion.

The following are some of the major “themes” and comments developed so far:

- ❑ **Communication:** While many were appreciative of getting a chance to hear about the work of the conference and opportunity to discuss and share in our future, there were a number of expressions that it took too long or that plans were developing behind the scenes.
- ❑ **MSC Vision Statement:** Some expressed surprise that the MSC had a vision/mission statement. In some cases it was read following the first video to help ground the discussion groups in the values of the MSC. There may have been an unfamiliarity with the idea that beyond our mission to make disciples for Jesus there is a way (vision) that is the expression our conference uses to carry out that mission.
- ❑ **Scenario Feedback:** Due to the constraints of time and group sizes, not all could fully engage in discussion surrounding all the scenarios presented. Larger groups in particular, were asked to discuss and comment on just one of the scenarios. There seemed to be a general consensus that it was just too much to think about in such a short time. On the upside however, the sessions did seem to generate a deeper desire to discuss these issues further in their churches and communities. It does appear that participants are generally in support of the potential need for separation from the Traditional Plan — most probably as an autonomous entity.
- ❑ **Connections:** In response to question #2 (*How does your church remain connected with other churches in the MSC?*) following the first video by Bishop Karen, there were the following comments:
 - **Local church:** While there were examples of church to church connections, there were also admissions that many did not intentionally reach out to other regional churches enough (or at all).

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- **Mountain Sky Conference:** Most expressions of connection between the local church and the MSC were positive, although some still feel estranged.
 - **General Conference:** Although not directly expressed in comments, there seems to be a prevailing opinion that the local church has very limited connection (or influence) with the General Conference.

□ **Questions for the Bishop, Cabinet, and Delegation.** The following were in response for direct feedback to the Bishop, Cabinet, and Delegation:

- Work toward assuring everyone has a safe home
- Communicate the MSC team purposes – what is happening behind the scene.
- How are we addressing answers for the whole body? Honor all.
- Encourage Bishop in her leadership
- Concern: Not wanting Bishop Oliveto removed
- What say do congregations have over all this, especially decision...
- What will happen to Reconciling churches?
- Will they go after our bishop?
- Can we get Cliff Notes versions of the plans going into GC 2020?
- Support the Bishop. We agree that she is doing a good job.
- We are not making decisions for God, just for our church.
- We need MORE communication!
- "We love and support ALL."
- Keep doing what you are doing
- We're not God (defer to him)
- We will remain with T.P. - not accept One Church. Use process to make the changes
- More communication in the future.
- We love and support all.
- We need to follow Jesus: acceptance of all people. Be kind, loving
- To remain a part of UMC would not be possible if the Traditional Plan continues.
- Church is going to split
- Indianapolis plan - 3
- Follow or change it
- We are opposed to staying in or resisting Traditional Plan
- Leaning more towards autonomy - possibly joining the AC's

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- Believe the current B.O. Discipline limits us and needs to be completely re-done - new name for sure! Along with completely new governance system. It is part (a large part) of why we're in this chaos.
 - Change Discipline
 - Remain autonomous locally - free to make decisions pertaining to our community
 - Affirming - the teachings of Jesus - the love of Jesus Christ for All people.
 - We want you to do something, fix it.
 - Be honorable.
 - Look at both sides, not pick and choose.
 - Keep it as simple as Jesus would.
 - Ask good questions
 - So we can hear what answer is.
 - Quit thinking of the power positions but start thinking about the Christ-like decisions.
 - One set of rules doesn't always work for everyone. Churches in Denver don't always have the same as rural churches. (But we also acknowledge that there are some similarities)
 - We are having a tough time trying to recruit for the United Methodist Church because we are embarrassed by what is going on in the greater church.
 - We don't see problems in our little churches.
 - Pray for our church, delegates, conference leadership
 - Accountability
 - There is some frustration with past history of telling the church what to do.
 - Offer that if it's not already built in, will each church have a vote for themselves?
 - Will individual churches have a vote on their future?
 - We wanted to make sure we are getting comments from both sides.
 - Neither side is sharing the opinion of the other side.
 - When a decision is made, we want the whole story from both sides.
 - Our church membership rolls have changed because of this divisiveness.
 - The whole world is looking at what Methodists are doing and how we are treating each other.
 - There needs to be a clear distinction that Traditional plan only affects clergy and marriages, not other LGBTQ persons.
 - One Church Plan

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- Be nice. Treat each other with respect.
 - I would hope that from these groups, whatever you take back to them, that they would really seriously consider what we have been talking about and make their decisions based on what the people want.
 - What I heard from the conversation today is we like living together. We have our bumps and warts, and we like arguing with each other, but that just pushes me to be a more well-rounded individual.
 - I wish I could say that I personally felt that we as a whole are deeply committed to keeping the family together. But there are people so strongly committed to their position, that they're ready to walk. But there are people who are equally committed to keeping everyone together.
 - Think a conference-wide electronic survey is a great idea. This could be done similarly to the UM Mainstream Survey back in May. The voice of those not in the room at the Focus Groups.
 - I feel totally unprepared to make a decision on how to proceed at this moment. How dare you ask me!!! I am just now finding out most this info. Our church is uniformed about most of this!
 - I am taken off guard that you are asking me to vote. This "Focus" session are dishonestly represented. You have manipulated us! me, especially!!!
S.P.R.C in- (?)

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- It seems to me the Book of Discipline needs to be changed in order to move forward. Also if there's a 88% (?) majority voting for the Traditional way the majority must want it to stay the same. My feeling - I would like to see the wishes of the Bible followed. Show passages in the Bible where God is not against gays and homosexuals to convince us to change.
 - Move away from this destructive focus & move toward worship, missions & acceptance.
 - I believe God would have us leave the "United" Methodist Church and Join the Wesleyan Covenant Association
 - I will not say I left my church - I will say she left me.
 - Our church will listen to the holy spirit to lead us. Showing our spiritual growth thru loving our neighbor

Some additional comments (not shared broadly) which would appear to be opportunities for education and messaging include:

- **Pastor Assignments:** There were several expressions of concern that the LGBTQ issue might include forced assignment of gay pastors to local congregations. This appears to drive a negative opinion about inclusion of broad LGBTQ support.
- **Traditional Plan Adherents:** There is support for the premise with regard to marriage as being between one man and one woman. However, there is generally a follow up sentiment that imposition of punishment may not be warranted although not universally.
- **Legacy Conferences:** There were lingering comments about the merger of the Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain conferences not yet feeling complete. This drove a “Rodney Dangerfield” reaction (no respect) that seemed to hinder a discussion about the future of the MSC.