

Reflections on the recent UMC General Conference in Charlotte, NC

--by Paul Newhouse

Technically known as the Postponed 2020 General Conference (meeting in 2024), this was my fourth time as an observer and volunteer, after Tampa in 2012, Portland in 2016, and St. Louis in 2019. In Charlotte, my main job was to serve as a morning greeter with the Love Your Neighbor Coalition, including a bit of French conversation and interpretation in respect of francophone African delegates.

The tone and outcomes of this Conference were vastly different from the preceding ones, particularly the one in 2019 when passage of the Traditional Plan derailed efforts to open pathways to greater inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the UMC.

In an atmosphere of calm collaboration, the Reconciling Ministries Network and allies saw overwhelming support for “the 3 R’s” -- Removal of harmful language, Revised Social Principles, and Regionalization. Homosexuality is no longer considered “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Gone are the rules prohibiting ordination of LGBTQ clergy, and performing a same-sex wedding is no longer a chargeable offense. Clergy are now free to follow their own conscience in deciding whether or not to perform a marriage ceremony, regardless of the gender identities of the couple before them.

Regionalization will restructure the global church to be less U.S.-centric, putting the African and Eurasian conferences in a more equal position vis-à-vis the U.S. region, while at the same time allowing the U.S. regional conference to contextualize the Book of Discipline for its own cultures, as the other regions are already able to do. Regionalization, being based on constitutional amendments, requires ratification over the next couple of years by a cumulative 2/3 majority vote of all annual conferences around the world. Our Western Jurisdiction RMN organizer, Rev. Izzy Alvaran, was instrumental in developing the regionalization proposal.

Of course, not everyone was happy with all of the votes, and there remains work to be done toward healing and growth, but for the first time in many years, the General Conference ended in a general spirit of rejoicing rather than lament and division.



Morning greeters at work



With Rev. Dr. Israel (Izzy) Alvaran,

RMN organizer for our region.