

**Questions and Answers regarding Unfinished Business item #4:
The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts regarding the
Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts**

In response to questions about the UB 4 report, the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives executive committee offer the following answers for the church to consider as we prepare to discuss issues of authority and accountability at Annual Conference.

Our report is a statement of clarification about current polity and standard practice.

While the Query: Same Sex Weddings was the reason Annual Conference sent the question about authority and accountability to us, this report describes how our polity guides decision-making on a wide range of issues, not just same-gender marriage. The report identifies the authority our polity gives to districts, and it reaffirms that our polity is to be lived out in accord with other Annual Conference decisions about the spirit in which we make decisions together.

Here are questions we have received and our answers.

1. Why are there no recommendations in the report, since the motion made at the 2016 Conference said you would bring recommendations to the 2017 Conference?

Answer: Our recommendations will be presented in the motion that will place this report on the floor at Annual Conference. Our intention is to recommend that this statement of clarification about our current polity and standard practice be accepted as the answer to our assignment and that the church turn its attention to the framing of a compelling vision for how we will continue the work of Jesus together.

2. Why doesn't this report recommend a change in polity or practice?

Answer: In our efforts to answer Annual Conference's request for clarity and guidance regarding authority and accountability, the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives have come to a mutual understanding that reaffirming our current polity and standard practice is the best way to move the church toward focusing on the mission we are called to work on together.

3. Can this report be amended?

Answer: As a statement of current polity and standard practice, the report itself would not be open to amendment. The motion to accept this report, however, will also call the church to turn its attention to the framing of a compelling vision for how we will continue the work of Jesus together, and that motion is open to debate and possible amendment.

4. Will a two-thirds majority vote be required?

Answer: It is Standing Committee's responsibility to determine whether the motion about this item of business will require a two-thirds majority vote or a simple majority vote. Polity requires a two-thirds majority vote for items that Standing Committee interprets as involving a change in polity, and it has become our standard practice that Standing Committee may determine that adoption of items of major consequence for the life of the church require a two-thirds majority vote.

5. Is this paper polity or a report that explains polity -- and what is the difference?

Answer: This is a report that explains current polity and standard practice. It is not polity in the sense of bringing a change in polity. If a change in polity had been recommended, that would have required the approval of a two-thirds majority vote.

6. Will this item of business go before Standing Committee for any action, or will it go directly to the delegate body?

Answer: This is a report to the delegate body, which assigned this item of business to the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives; it will go directly to the full delegate body. Standing Committee, however, is responsible for deciding whether any portions of the report or any recommendations of the motion will require a two-thirds majority vote. Therefore, in keeping with Conference Rule 1, which states, "Standing Committee may review the reports of Conference committees but has no authority to change or revise such reports," the officers have planned time for the general secretary and the Council of District Executives to discuss this report with Standing Committee.

7. What happens if this report is not approved by the delegates – would we be back to an open floor with people vying for microphones to be the first to propose a new solution?

Answer: If this report is not accepted by the delegates as the answer to last year's assignment, the issue that would then be on the floor would be how to fulfill last year's decision to seek "clarity and guidance concerning the authority of Annual Conference and districts regarding the accountability of ministers, congregations, and districts." The query about same sex weddings would not return. It was answered last year when the delegate body decided to refer the concerns of the query to the Leadership Team in consultation with the district executives as a part of this much broader assignment. The officers will consider what they will do if the report would not be approved, just as they consider possible scenarios that might arise with regard to any of the business items.

8. Why does the report talk about "ministerial conduct" and "ministerial misconduct"? (in lines 42-48 on p. 9 of our document as posted online; lines 16-22 on p. 241 in the Conference booklet, which will be available in May.)

Answer: The statement about how to handle a report received regarding a minister who has performed a same sex wedding is taken word for word from an agreement established by the Council of District Executives:

"If a district executive minister receives a report based on direct knowledge that a minister has performed a same gender marriage, the information shall be reported to the district's credentialing body as a matter of ministerial conduct."

This is current standard procedure for our denomination. The distinction between "ministerial conduct" and "ministerial misconduct" is that reports of ministerial misconduct must be processed by the district ethics committee, whereas reports of ministerial conduct are to be processed through the district's credentialing body (the district ministry commission or the district ministerial credentialing committee, etc.). The credentialing body can then determine what next steps to take, if any. There can be legal ramifications once the ethics process has begun. Only acts of ministerial misconduct as described in the ethics process should be identified as misconduct. Any report that has to do with other kinds of ministerial conduct should be handled through the district's credentialing committee. We will add an endnote at the end of the sentence about ministerial conduct to clarify: *"This is a standard practice established by the Council of District Executives."*

9. Why does the report talk about expelling a congregation when our polity speaks only about the possible “disorganizing” of a congregation and does not use the term “expel”? (see lines 38-40 on p. 9 of our document as posted online; line 13 on p. 241 in the Conference booklet)

Answer: When the paper is presented to the delegate body, the general secretary and the executive committee of the Council of District Executives will ask the delegate body to replace the word “expel” with the word “*disorganize*,” in recognition that polity only gives the district authority to disorganize a congregation. We will also delete the phrase “from the body” at the end of that sentence. The sentence will therefore change from:

“We will not take lightly decisions that will terminate an individual’s ministerial credentials or expel a congregation from the body.”

to read:

“We will not take lightly decisions that will terminate an individual’s ministerial credentials or disorganize a congregation.”

When we wrote this report we used the word “expel” because some districts are beginning to use that term and we wanted to address their current practice. Because the term “expel” is not part of our current polity nor of standard practices approved by the Council of District Executives, we will add an endnote at the end of this sentence to state: “*Some districts have begun to speak about ‘expelling’ member congregations, but current polity and standard practice provide only for the ‘disorganizing’ of congregations.*”

10. Is there a conflict of interest for the AC officers, since they serve on the Leadership Team that wrote this report and also as the officers who will process it as an item of business?

Answer: The officers simply carried out the assignment that the 2016 Annual Conference gave them as they participated in framing an answer to this item of business. The officers will turn their attention to enabling the delegate body to process this item of business as the general secretary and the executive committee of the Council of District Executives present the report to the delegate body. It is not unusual for Annual Conference officers to explain polity to the delegate body. Because this report is simply an interpretation of current polity and standard practice, we do not believe it to be a conflict of interest.

If you have other questions or concerns, please contact the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives in care of the Office of the General Secretary.

Also, you are invited to attend the hearings at Annual Conference for this item of business.