



AFRICA INITIATIVE SPEAKS: A Press Release

Africa Initiative's Pre-General Conference Prayer Retreat
Desmond Tutu Retreat Center, Nairobi, Kenya 8-12 April 2024
12 April 2024

The Africa Initiative, a renowned biblically committed and Christ-centered advocacy movement within the three Central Conferences of Africa, convened a pre-General Conference prayer retreat for African delegates to the upcoming 2024 General Conference. A hundred and fifty (150) African leaders and delegates participated in the prayer retreat, which took place at the Desmond Tutu Conference Center in Nairobi, Kenya, from 8-12 April 2024. The theme of the retreat was, “*Reclaiming our Identity*”, based on the scriptural text, Matthew 5:13-16.

The purpose of the retreat was to *evaluate the past* (historicity of the birth of Christianity in Africa, leading to its current massive growth), to *understand the present* (contextual and global realities influencing the church in Africa), and to *envision and anticipate a future* with hope. This was in a bid to reclaim our identity in Jesus Christ alone, as our Savior, Lord, Provider and Sustainer, and to renew our unwavering commitment to sustaining biblical Christianity in Africa.

Among many other things, participants deeply reflected on the Scripture, in the context of “*reclaiming our identity*”, and held frank discussions on the current state of the UMC worldwide, regarding the issue of regionalization, and factors necessitating discernment on disaffiliation. They also discussed episcopal elections across the three central conferences in Africa, self-sustainability of annual conferences, the need to redirect theological education for African pastors from the West to Africa; and factors for sustaining biblical leadership and church growth in Africa.

At the close of the retreat, leaders of the Africa Initiative and delegates to the 2024 General Conference prayerfully voted and committed themselves to the following resolutions:

1. **No Regionalization of the UMC.** Participants took a unanimous vote against the passage of the proposed regionalization petition that is currently before the 2024 General Conference for the following reasons:
 - (a) Regionalization contradicts our current connectional system that brings together quadrennial representatives from all United Methodist annual conferences worldwide to decide on social, economic, political and theological issues of concerns to the Denomination.
 - (b) Regionalization fragments our one worldwide UMC into several regional denominations, allowing each region to govern itself with its own book of discipline, exclusive of the other regions. Under such an arrangement, if regionalization passes, no region would have a say in what another region believes, teaches, or practices. We would be a divided church preaching different gospels, pretending to be one denomination. Additionally, for Africa, regionalization is reminiscent of the 1885 Berlin Conference where the partitioning and parceling out of Africa took place. We reject this subtle plan to take contemporary Africa back to that colonial era in the name of regionalization.
 - (c) Regionalization is a recipe for fragmenting the message of the gospel, and thereby presenting a distorted Christianity to the world, that contradicts the biblically based liberating message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - (d) Regionalization is an economic death trap for the UMC in Africa, and other central conferences with limited financial resources. The Regionalization proposal aims to group the five jurisdictions in America into one region, while disintegrating the three central conferences in Africa into three regions. Given that the five jurisdictions of the UMC in America are combining their economic resources and political forces to be one region at the expense of other central conferences they are proposing will stand alone as individual regions, any attempt to regionalize the denomination could financially disenfranchise the rest of the UMC worldwide, Africa in particular. Such a decision would give the American UMC the controlling power economically and

politically, even though they are fast declining in number. It could also create greater financial dependency on the West, with perilous consequences for the rest.

(e) Regionalization would liberalize the UMC worldwide, thus making the denomination biblically and theologically unsafe and unwelcome for evangelicals and conservatives. The liberals and progressives within the UMC have publicly indicated in print and electronic media that they will remove the restrictive language in the denomination's Social Principles regarding sexual orientation, same-gendered marriage, ordination of LGBTQIA+ persons as clergy, and the election and consecration of gays and lesbians as bishops. Regionalization supports this plan. We therefore reject the regionalization petition.

2. **Reject Changes to the Definition of Marriage and all petitions that attempt to liberalize our sexual ethics.** Participants voted to reject any petition to change the definition of marriage as contained in the denomination's Social Principles and Book of Discipline. There are petitions before the 2024 General Conference from some liberals and progressives within the UMC to change the language of the Social Principles regarding marriage and sexual ethics. In support of same-gender marriage, they are proposing to change the current definition of marriage, which states that, "Marriage is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman", to a new definition that states, "Marriage is a relationship between two people of faith". We reject these petitions because Scripture teaches that same-gender union is sin (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:24-27; Romans 1:10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11) and thus incompatible with Christian living.
3. **Strong Support for Disaffiliation Petitions for fairness and justice.** The disaffiliation petitions propose that the General Conference should vote to give the Central Conferences in Africa, Asia and Europe the rights to pray, discern and make their own decisions regarding the issue of disaffiliation, just as the annual conferences of the five jurisdictions in the United States had that right. This is an issue of fairness and justice. At the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference, delegates from the worldwide UMC, including African delegates, voted to pass paragraph 2553, which gives the right to all local churches within the global Denomination to pray and discern whether to sever their relationship with the Denomination or not. The decision was not an exclusive right to the UMC in America, but to all. However, when the time came for its implementation, the central

conferences in Africa were denied the right to participate in the discernment process and determine their own future. We believe this result was unfair and grossly disenfranchised annual conferences in Africa. We believe we have been treated as second-class members of the one denomination to which we all belong. We believe that what is good and fair for annual conferences of jurisdictions in America should be good and fair for annual conferences in Africa. We therefore support the petitions to allow the annual conferences and local churches in Africa, Asia, and Europe the right to go through the process of discernment and make their own decisions whether or not to remain a part of the UMC denomination. The General Conference must do at least one honourable thing by making things right.

4. **Requests Episcopal Elections within 3 months after General Conference.** Consistent with directives of the 2016 Book of Discipline, participants to the Prayer Retreat resolved to request a Declaratory Decision from the Judicial Council on the issue of episcopal elections following the holding of General Conference in May 2024. According to the Book of Discipline, paragraph 408.1b, “A bishop in a central conference shall be retired at a date no later than three months following the adjournment of General Conference.” However, some influential leaders within the UMC appear to be making efforts to extend the stay of some bishops who are overdue for retirement into office until December 2024 before conducting episcopal elections in the Central Conferences of Africa. This proposed plan, if implemented, would be a gross violation of the Book of Discipline. Delegates to the Prayer Retreat reject this proposed plan. Following General Conference in May, Central Conferences should conduct episcopal elections in August 2024, and new bishops take office as of September 2024, in keeping with the mandates of the 2016 Book of Discipline.

Following the passing of these resolutions, delegates elected by their annual conferences to the 2020 General Conference lamented their disenfranchisement by the Commission on General Conference and its staff. We are deeply grieved that the Commission has alienated some of our delegates from participating in the events of the General Conference by its poor handling of the General Conference matters. The Commission staff communicated poorly with heads of delegations regarding their delegates’ registration and participation. It sent out invitation letters to

some delegates only two months before General Conference, while others did not receive their invitation letters until one month ago, unlike previous General Conferences where the process was better organized, knowing very well that it takes four to six months to process visas at most American embassies in Africa.

Some delegates who succeeded at booking interviews and were denied could not be replaced because the Commission staff failed to timely send invitation letters to official alternate delegates, despite endless appeals from heads of delegation. Therefore, for the first time in General Conference history, about 60-80 official delegates from Africa may be absent at the General Conference, not by their choice, but due to failures on the part of the Commission on General Conference and its staff, which appear to the casual observer to have the purpose of marginalizing African delegates and reducing their delegation.

We want the world to know that leaders and staff of the Commission on the 2024 General Conference have treated the delegates from the Central Conferences in Africa very unfairly and with disdain. We come to this General Conference with a deep sense of rejection, unacceptance, and gross disenfranchisement, as if we do not matter. This brings to question the credibility of a General Conference session held under such conditions. Our confidence in the leaders and staff responsible for the 2024 General Conference is totally lost. We, however, come to contend for the faith once entrusted to our ancestors, and now to us, by many American missionaries whose burial tombs all across Africa are a testimony of their sacrificial labor in proclaiming the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ that we dare to sustain in Africa. To God be the glory!

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On behalf of Africa Initiative Members and Delegates to the 2024 General Conference