

First United Methodist Church

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February 22, 2022

To the Members of the Commission on the General Conference

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing to express my deep concerns, in the wake of our January meeting, over what appears to me to be direction in which our Commission is moving. I was astonished that several of our team proposed a decision to postpone or cancel at that meeting, and was relieved when the body rightly decided that such a decision would be premature.

However, it does not seem a stretch to infer, from the tenor of remarks by various members and staff, the existence of a growing sense that we will inevitably need to postpone yet again. I cannot emphasize enough my conviction that such a move would be a tremendous mistake.

All the signs point to our ability to hold an in-person conference, as the pandemic subsides, and restrictions continue to be eased. I have a physician cousin who is chief of infectious diseases at a major metropolitan children's hospital, and she informed me of two upcoming, in-person conferences which will bring together thousands of physicians and medical professionals for the first time in several years. One, a combined meeting of four pediatric organizations, will be held in Denver April 24-25. The other is an international gathering of infectious disease specialists, to be held in Washington DC in October. These are cautious medical professionals who have been at the forefront of dealing with COVID, and they are confident that in-person conventions are safe to hold. Certainly, with appropriate safety protocols, we can hold a church-related conference, as the United Methodist Woman are doing in just a few months in Orlando.

Of course, we will have many non-American delegates who will need to be vaccinated to attend. I do not understand why we did not have a status report on the vaccination rates for our delegates outside the US for our January meeting. Nor do I understand why we have not been calling upon every relevant organization related to the United Methodist Church to pitch in and do all they can, and spend whatever money is necessary, to assist our delegates to be vaccinated. While I am perplexed by the criticisms which have been levelled at the WCA for acting to assist in this matter, I agree that that they should never have felt any need to do so; our bishops and boards should have been all over this.

I understand that obtaining visas for all the different delegations is also a challenge. But I am concerned about reports I have received that we have not begun issuing letters to delegates in countries where the window to apply is now open. As of now, we have declared that General Conference is on, so we should be moving forward in a manner consistent with that plan. I am glad that we will receive a status report on visas at our February meeting, and hope to learn that much progress is being made.

I also am concerned about the claim that we cannot cancel, but only postpone again, the 2020 General Conference. In view of the unavailability of venues in 2023, this may well mean waiting until 2024 to hold the 2020 conference. I heard the explanation that we cannot find warrant or

permission in the *Discipline* to cancel a General Conference. But it is one thing to say that we can find no explicit permission to cancel; it is quite another to say that the *Discipline* prohibits it. Frankly, much has happened during this unprecedented period which the *Discipline* doesn't directly address – not the least of which is the continued funding of general church boards and agencies in the absence of any General Conference actions to approve budgets or authorize expenditures.

If indeed the Commission decides to delay the conference again to as late as 2024, I cannot see how we can justly or credibly say that it is still the 2020 General Conference, and seat the delegates elected in 2019. There is the simple injustice of disfranchising central conferences, which would be entitled by 2024 to have greater representation in the delegate count based on membership changes. In addition, both the world and the church have changed since 2019. Bishop Bickerton made the comment that much has changed since January 2020, in regard to the perceptions and priorities of members, delegates and leaders. If that is so – and I do not disagree – is it not also true that even more will have changed between the election of delegates in 2019 and the time they will actually be seated in 2024? I could not, in good conscience, vote for a further postponement of the 2020 General Conference, and will not support such a decision publicly or privately. A cancellation is something I would consider but would have to be convinced beyond reasonable doubt is absolutely necessary.

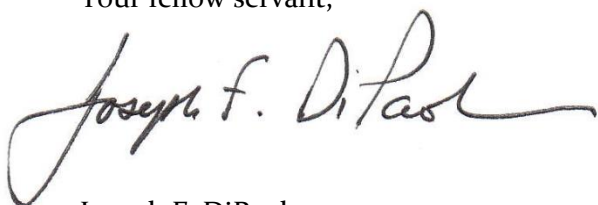
We all know that there is a serious trust deficit among rank-and-file United Methodists toward the leadership of our denomination. I have had to respond to many suspicious questions and cynical assertions about our work as a Commission. I have consistently reassured people that the members and staff of the commission are doing everything possible to make the 2020 session happen. I am now beginning to wonder if I can continue to do so with confidence.

Our commission – and our bishops – need to do everything we possibly can to ensure the General Conference is held this summer. Even if some delegates cannot get here, we can undoubtedly assemble a quorum to hold the conference, between those from America and the many Central Conference delegates we know will be able to make the trip.

It is imperative that we do so. The United Methodist Church is stuck in an untenable period of limbo. We must allow the governing body of the denomination to meet and openly address our dilemma and the various plans which have been proposed to address it. If we announce a postponement or cancellation, I am convinced the United Methodist Church will experience serious and potentially irreparable harm. If that happens, we can expect the situation in North Georgia with Mount Bethel Church to be multiplied many times over. I say that not with a desire to see such things come to pass, but with great sorrow over the many churches and ministries which will be harmed by the renewed and intensified conflict which will undoubtedly follow in the wake of a cancellation.

Thank you for considering my thoughts. I join with you in prayer that God will guide us in our deliberations.

Your fellow servant,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph F. DiPaolo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.

Joseph F. DiPaolo
EPA Conference