

The GNJ Way Forward Team Report

I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly. - Jesus

Jesus and his followers faced challenges and yet he invited them to thrive. In that same spirit, the GNJ Way Forward Team invites disciples of Jesus Christ and congregations in GNJ to thrive.

The United Methodist Church has experienced conflict about our ministry with the LGBTQ community, and in response to the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference, the GNJ annual conference, at its meeting in March, empowered the Way Forward Team to identify how GNJ would be in ministry with all people, including the LGBTQ community. The team is comprised of people of different ethnicities, representatives of small, medium and large churches, members of the LGBTQ community, laity and clergy, elected leaders and non-elected leaders of GNJ. Theologically there are conservatives, those representing the center, progressives, evangelicals, traditionalists and liberationists.

The Team met a total of 37+ hours face-to-face, and additionally by conference call and in small teams. The Team worked together based on a covenant that said we are called for such a time as this to serve the whole church. We did not seek to try to change one another, nor did we take any votes during our time together. We found consensus through prayer, conversation and invitation of others feedback. The Team's initial direction was radically changed following information learned through the focus groups, listening sessions and survey, which involved feedback from more than 800 people. The Team did not seek agreement with one another. We knew in the midst of our diversity, we would not achieve agreement with one another. We found that we could agree to a path forward because we believe this path is best for the church at this time.

You may not find agreement with the plan or parts of the plan, rather the GNJ Way Forward Team invites you to remain open about agreeing to a path that recognizes differences, and offers all congregations and disciples of Jesus Christ an opportunity to move forward so that all can thrive in their relationship with Jesus Christ and for the greater mission of the church. We humbly offer this report as the prayerful and faithful work of the Team to all of the congregations of GNJ.

The GNJ Way Forward Team

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Rev. Kay Dubuisson
Rev. Drew Dyson
Rev. Amanda Hemenetz

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Kathy Schulz
Bethany Amey Sutton

Rev. Cliff Still
Rev. David Wehrle
Lew Weil
Rosa Williams
Rev. Jessica Winderweedle
Michael Yang

The GNJ Connectional Table

Rev. Tanya Linn Bennett
Rev. Debbe Barnett
Rev. Sarah Borgstrom Lee
Rev. John Callanan
Rev. Christine Day
Rev. Debra De Vos
Robert Dietz
Rev. Evan Dodge
Rev. Sang Won Doh

Rev. Karline Dubuisson
Rev. Blair Goold
Eleanor Hartley
Rev. Chris Heckert
Rev. Tom Korkuch
Rev. Vijaya Kumar
Rev. Isabel Quezada
Rev. Iraida Ruiz de Porras
Rev. Michelle Ryoo

Kathy Schulz
Rev. Clifford Still
Lewis Weil
Rev. David Wiley
Rosa Williams
Rev. Vanessa Wilson
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The GNJ Way Forward Team Mission

Plan a way forward that supports GNJ's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and grow vital congregations to transform the world.

The GNJ Way Forward Team Principles

1. Bless and love one another as we serve the mission and ministries that unite us.
2. Grow spiritually as we connect with one another and with the people in our communities.

The GNJ Way Forward Team Goals

1. To work with our congregations to identify objectives, opportunities, challenges and structures that support their efforts to thrive.
2. To renew and create new connections with one another through ministry and mission.

The GNJ Way Forward Team Measures for Success

1. Churches grow in attendance, vitality and impact
2. Churches sustain and/or increase their financial stewardship
3. Clergy and laity experience lessened conflict, diminished harm and reduced anxiety
4. Clergy and laity fulfill their calling and serve without fear



Listening and Responding

The GNJ Way Forward Team used the information learned during the listening sessions, focus groups and survey to make significant modifications to their work and plans. The following are findings that impacted the decisions:

1. People shared that they didn't understand what a pilot was or why they were needed. The Team's way forward will not create pilot programs.
2. People shared that they did not want to be divided or separated into different groups. The Team's way forward will not divide congregations into different expressions.
3. People expressed anger for different reasons.
4. The Book of Discipline "is not being followed."
 - a. The passage of the traditional plan "reinforced discrimination about LGBTQ people and mandated penalties for clergy who are in ministry for full inclusion."
 - b. Reports of "dividing the denomination into smaller denominations is not acceptable." The Team is not recommending a plan to divide GNJ or the denomination.
5. People expressed their congregation needs help facilitating a conversation about LGBTQ inclusion and requested GNJ provide resource people to help facilitate conversations.
6. People shared they wanted to continue to do ministry together, particularly in the areas of mission and resourcing.



A Way Forward

The GNJ Way Forward Team believes GNJ and our congregations can thrive even as we recognize that United Methodists have different beliefs, understandings and experiences concerning human sexuality. All churches within The United Methodist Church are bound to uphold the standards of the Book of Discipline. Yet the GNJ Way Forward Team recognizes that congregations have convictions about their ministry, who they are to be in ministry with and who God calls them to be.

Therefore, we invite congregations to develop covenants about how they will be in ministry with God, one another and with the community as they seek to thrive in serving God. Congregations and clergy who want to pursue a path that includes being in ministry with and by LGBTQ people may develop a covenant that affirms:

1. All human beings are of sacred worth, and LGBTQ people are not incompatible with Christian teaching.
2. Pastors are free to perform weddings for same-gender couples.
3. Churches are free to host weddings for same-gender couples.
4. Churches affirm the ordination, licensing, and appointment of gay and lesbian candidates on the basis of their gifts for ministry and are open to receiving appointments of gay and lesbian clergy.
5. Churches are free to utilize financial resources for ministry with all persons, including LGBTQ persons.
6. Individual clergy and laity are free to carry out such ministry without the threat of formal charges and/or other punitive measures recognizing that United Methodists in Greater New Jersey are not punitive but a body of believers who choose to live in grace and unity.

The covenant will frame the congregation's responsibility to LGBTQ persons, their community, the worshipers in their congregation, their connection to other GNJ congregations and their connection to the annual conference and the denomination.

The Team learned many congregations want to move forward with ministry that affirms the full participation of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church while other congregations are not ready or do not see this as a part of their ministry. These congregations can develop other covenants that affirm their convictions and beliefs about their ministry with God, with one another and with the community.

Congregations are not required to develop a covenant, or may choose to wait to develop a covenant. Developing a covenant is voluntary.



The GNJ Way Forward Team calls the GNJ Leadership to:

1. Continue to resource congregational leaders to make disciples and grow vital congregations to transform the world.
2. Shepherd all congregations into the future recognizing our diversity of culture, ethnicity and belief.
3. Create sacred space for congregations to thrive in their context.
4. Seek to eliminate harm to the people in our communities and congregations.
5. Care for youth in our congregations and in our communities, who face discrimination, hatred and harm because of their sexuality and gender identity. Death by suicide is significantly higher among LGBTQ youth than among their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. The Team calls all congregations to be sensitive and alert to the needs of youth in our congregations and community and to use the resources for LGBTQ youth found at gnjumc.org/protecting-children-and-youth/end-harm-to-youth.
6. Make available trained facilitators to assist interested congregations with conversations about ministry with LGBTQ persons and to develop covenants about ministry with the LGBTQ community as well as other missional commitments that empower contextual ministries of justice, mercy and peace.
7. Honor congregational covenants, particularly the cabinet when making appointments and working with congregations.
8. Engage someone to coordinate and resource the covenanting process for congregations.
9. Make training and coaching available, particularly in congregations where there are differences concerning human sexuality, so that each person can see that others matter just like they do.
10. Provide a web page for congregations to communicate that they are a welcoming congregation who affirms the full inclusion of LGBTQ people so that people from the community, especially LGBTQ people, can locate a congregation to worship with and participate in ministry.

GNJ Annual Conference affirmed:

1. Bishop Schol's prayerful declaration that he will not forward for trial any charges arising out of the ministry of LGBTQ+ clergy or any clergyperson's ministry with the LGBTQ+ community.
2. The principled decision of the Board of Ordained Ministry to disregard sexual orientation or gender identity as a basis for recommending candidates for ministry, and
3. The Spirit-led witness of local churches and clergy who will create covenants for ministry with the LGBTQ+ community, while recognizing the courageous leadership of churches and pastors who have been engaged in this ministry for years.

The GNJ Way Forward Team Covenants to:

1. Take immediate action by naming and addressing harm by anyone's words or actions and call others to do the same.
2. Support anyone who has been harmed by someone's words or actions.
3. Provide templates for all our congregations to use as a part of the covenanting process including for those who affirm ministry with and by LGBTQ persons. The covenant will include statements to:
 - a. Protect LGBTQ persons in ministry from harm and hurt either by intention or neglect
 - b. Protect clergy from complaints
 - c. Listen to and encourage all voices in the congregation and community including age, social status, gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality.
4. Facilitate and resource conversations with all congregations who desire to develop a covenant.
5. Create a web page for people in our communities to identify the different types of congregations in ministry in GNJ.
6. Communicate with frequency and transparency so that people in different congregations can learn from each other and bless each other's ministry to thrive in making disciples of Jesus Christ and grow vital congregations to transform the world.
7. Check-in regularly and support congregations who create or are creating a covenant so that they can thrive.

Covenant Process

1. Facilitators will be trained to lead the process with congregations who are interested and ready.
2. Churches identify congregational leaders with the pastor's input to work on the covenant. The GNJ Way Forward Team will develop guidelines for selecting team members with diverse perspectives and inclusive of the congregation and community and a facilitator to work with the congregation.
3. The facilitator will:
 - a. Explain the covenant process to help churches move forward and live their calling
 - b. Develop guidelines for mutually respecting conversation
 - c. Ensure that all voices are heard in the process of discernment
 - d. Share resources to help churches identify their mission, vision and ministry with the people in the community and LGBTQ people
 - e. Create a timeframe for the covenant-making process including a timeline and benchmarks
 - f. Identify a timeline and process for check ins and support
 - g. Help the leaders identify how the covenant will be shared with the congregation, community and GNJ leadership.





Congregations Who Seek Disaffiliation

The general conference approved a disaffiliation process for congregations that seek to leave The United Methodist Church because they are in disagreement with The Book of Discipline policies about homosexuality. The GNJ Way Forward Team does not want to see any congregation leave GNJ or The United Methodist Church, but for informational purposes the disaffiliation process is shared here. This plan allows congregations to assume ownership of all real and personal property if they meet the following conditions.

1. The GNJ Board of Trustees sets the financial amount for settlement that includes:
 - a. All debt owed to GNJ or any United Methodist entity.
 - b. The pension and health liability as calculated by Wespeth and the annual conference.
 - c. Any apportionments and billables owed to the annual conference for the current year as well as all unpaid billables in the past.
 - d. An amount set by the board of trustees for all real and personal property that may be 70% of the appraised value for all buildings and land taking into consideration condition of the building and the market.
 - e. If there is a cemetery and the congregation will not own the cemetery after disaffiliation, an amount for the perpetual care of the cemetery calculated by the board of trustees.
 - f. Any other fees and charges set by the board of trustees.
2. A theological rationale drafted by the leadership of the congregation that indicates where and how the congregation's theology is different than The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church or the policies and practices of GNJ for review and approval by the GNJ Cabinet.
3. A vote of 66% by the professing members of the congregation at a duly called and announced church conference presided by the district superintendent using the actual disaffiliation legislation that is approved by the district superintendent and includes the above items.
4. A majority vote by the annual conference while in session.

Once all of these items have been completed, the deed (s) may be changed and the congregation may leave with all real and personal property.

Congregations Seeking to Affiliate with Other Wesleyan Denominations

The GNJ Way Forward Team recognizes that there may be congregations who believe they can most faithfully carry out their ministry by affiliating with other Wesleyan denominations. The GNJ Way Forward Team is considering different steps for these circumstances. The process and information for affiliation with other Wesleyan denominations will be developed and brought to the 2020 annual conference session.

Next Steps: Covenants and Graceful Conversations

Covenants

GNJ will support congregations that want to develop a covenant with trained facilitators. The facilitators will be trained to facilitate conversation and not influence outcomes. A covenant may take two to twelve months to develop and GNJ will be prepared to support up to 60 congregations at a time. GNJ will provide ongoing support and consultation before, during and after the covenant process.

Graceful Conversations

Some congregations may want assistance in learning how to have difficult, graceful conversation in the midst of difference prior to considering or engaging in a covenant process. GNJ will provide training and a process for how to have grace-filled conversations in which all voices are heard and respected and words help or heal rather than hurt.

Timeline:

November

- GNJ recruits and trains facilitators to lead the covenanting processes in congregations
- GNJ identifies an individual to coordinate the facilitators of the covenanting process
- Congregations begin to identify if they would like Graceful Conversation training
- Congregations begin to identify if they would like support in developing a covenant

December - March

- Congregational Graceful Conversation training scheduled and begun
- Covenanting congregations facilitation scheduled and begun

April - May

- Congregations with similar covenants or experiences will be invited to gather to share their learnings and next steps
- Report to the annual conference session about experiences, learnings and next steps

June - September

- New round of Graceful Conversations training begins
- New round of covenanting begins

