



The Connectional Table

The United Methodist Church

Visioning Conversations

U.S. Discussion Groups Themes

July 2022

Connectional Table Visioning Conversations: U.S. Discussion Groups Themes

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Background

The Connectional Table (CT) engaged as host of conversations across the connection with regionally based discussion groups sharing perspectives that explore and seek to define The United Methodist Church (UMC) *identity, mission, vision, and connectionalism*. Discussion groups were held during the November 2021 – March 2022 period.

This work is grounded in the Connectional Table's purpose and essential functions. As noted in the *Book of Discipline*, The Connectional Table's purpose is "...for the discernment and articulation of the vision for the church and the stewardship of the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church as determined by the actions of the General Conference and in consultation with the Council of Bishops" (§ 904).

The CT is further mandated "To enable the flow of information and communication among annual conferences, jurisdictions, central conferences, general agencies and the Council of Bishops" (§ 905.2). As well, the CT is to do its work by, "...listening to the expression of needs, addressing emerging issues, and determining the most effective, cooperative, and efficient way to provide optimum stewardship of ministries, personnel, and resources" (§ 905.3).

The gathered information from across the UMC regions will be used to guide the UMC as the church casts a vision for the future during this time of transition. In particular, the CT's use of this work is to begin to articulate both identity and vision and to begin to coalesce around common ideas as well as to glean how identity and vision might shape global regionalization, connectionalism, and mission.

This document focuses on themes based on the U.S. discussion groups only. Separate documents will provide information from discussion groups held in Europe, the Philippines, and Africa, reflecting the respective regional context for the discussion questions about identify, mission, vision, and connectionalism.

The U.S. Regional Context document is available here: [Imagining the Future: U.S. Regional Context](#)

U.S. Discussion Groups

Fifty-four (54) groups took place consisting of:

- Large church in Southeast Jurisdiction
- Connectional Table (multiple groups)
- United Women in Faith (multiple groups)
- North Central Jurisdiction Delegates (multiple groups)

Group size ranged from 4 to 10 participants. Discussions typically lasted 60-90 minutes. Participants in any group were by invitation only; there was no "public" signup to join a group. A facilitator and scribe aided the discussion process.

Following each discussion, a summary using a standard form – without any identifying information included as far as "who said what" – was provided to the CT. Those summaries may be found in the separate **Appendix** document containing all the U.S. summaries received by the CT. Based on the summary information using a "landscape lens", key themes are captured below for each of the following:

- Identity
- Mission
- Vision
- Connectionalism

Connectional Table Visioning Conversations: U.S. Discussion Groups Themes

Predominant Themes

The *predominant themes* below from across the questions discussed represent perspectives most often stated among the variety of those offered during discussion groups. These themes are the ones found with more frequency across the responses landscape and span over a number of the discussion group questions. *Note that for any of the questions discussed, there may be contrarian viewpoints.*

Furthermore, if additional discussion groups had been conducted with yet different representation from those that were held, that may yet lead to a shift in some of the key themes identified.

- **Mission-focused, community-oriented** – outreach to meet the community's needs; caring for others
- **Global reach** – commitment to global work; global mission and support
- **Social justice** – social action and advocacy; strive to live up to Social Principles
- **Grace** – understand and show grace; be a church that is grace-filled
- **Divided, lack of unity** – benefits no one; fractured; not cohesive
- **Sometimes inclusive** – try to be inclusive and welcome all; local church experiences differ
- **Diversity** – wide range of thinking; intention there, not always lived out
- **Structures and polity** – positives and negatives; good and bad of the democratic process
- **Connectionalism** – shared resources and methods; structure enables us to have that connection with one another and support and assist one another
- **Role of women and laity** – mostly valued; more so than other denominations
- **Regionalism** – big differences within regions that need to be addressed differently; should have expression in our regionalism
- **Democratic process** – democratic governance weaves us together; bound by democracy and that reflects what we are going through now

What follows below are *key themes for the specific discussion group questions* as well as various associated comments that help illustrate and characterize the theme. The separate **Appendix** document provides the full spectrum of responses shared via the summary forms received from all the discussion groups.

Identity

1. How would you describe the values of the UMC?

- **Mission oriented locally and worldwide:** Community outreach/focused; global and local in our focus, contextualization for the setting of our ministries; social justice connectivity, the numerous resources available to all lay people no matter where you are located across the U.S. and the world; engaged in the community; caring for those in need; outreach and missions to the world.
- **More tolerance of each other at the local level:** Local church values may be different than that of the world-wide church; saying that we are tolerant is one way of saying that we do have a broad spectrum of opinions within the church; diverse worship styles; my personal church – inclusive, open, healthy transitions.
- **Open hearts, open minds, open doors:** big-tent theology; living together in a big tent; open table for communion; having an open heart and an open mind, and welcoming people irrespective of their backgrounds; good motto, not well lived.
- **Value laity (more than other denominations):** Laity important; strong connection between clergy and laity; polity highlights role of laity, but reality is the laity are often undermined; Methodists get things done; partnership of lay and clergy in ministry; laity input in governance.
- **Sometimes inclusive:** Only if people look like us and have the same opinions of us do we welcome them; inclusivity, everyone has value and self-worth – these are our values, we are trying to move more in that direction; say welcome all – but don't really; supposed to welcome others, but don't do it; shift in welcome – optics more about harm; lines of separation visible at in-person event; the Open Table value is rooted in welcome and inclusion of all people.
- **Grace:** Wesleyan understanding of grace; grace is the key value that undergirds our church; emphasizing and emanating God's grace; unique understanding of grace; Wesleyan heritage with its emphasis on God's grace.
- **Tension to live into the values:** To be a diverse church, the church genuinely has that intent but it is not lived out; living out values depends on how the church functions; grace and discipleship are prominent expressed values but living that has been a challenge; want to be who say we are; the values that are authentic to Wesley are inhibited by the polity of the UMC; expressed values or lived values – they are not always the same; confused about values in our current state; fractured; value inclusiveness and diversity, but are not always comfortable with those who are different than us; often a huge gap between our stated values and what we actually do; say we value differences but do we know how to live together with our differences.
- **Connectionalism and methods:** Method of doing things, deployment of clergy, educational standards and the consistency is valued by lay people; shared resources and mutual support through connectionalism; theological education, seminary for clergy and training for laypeople; church methods same (worship, hymns, structure/governance, etc.); discipleship and methods are very Wesleyan; methodology and structure to a point but too many hands sometimes; connectionalism (connected to person near and far by our shared theology, polity, traditions, culture, etc.); connectional locally and globally.

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- **Social justice:** Commitment to social justice; but do we actually implement what we say we value; social programs – outreach to the community, service, advocating for changes; speaking out for justice; we must hold firm to our roots of social justice; a passion for and a call to the work of social justice; justice seeking.

In addition, several references across the groups included:

- Wesley's *Three Simple Rules* (do no harm, do good, stay in love with God);
- The *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience);
- Being Christ-centered; and
- Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

2. What words come to mind when you think about the personality of the UMC?

- **Local church experience is different:** Small local churches are open and warm; some local churches – certain people are welcomed (others are not); congregations different, have their own personality; variety of churches, inclusive enough to embrace large variety; vastly different experiences in different places and level of church; larger church different reputation – self-righteousness, litigiousness.
- **Open hearts, open minds, open doors:** Friendly and welcoming; accepting; comfortable and welcoming – not extremely formal; warmth; more interested in others than themselves; not as open as we claim; pride ourselves on having open hearts, open minds, open doors success – don't really practice that; are we open hearts, minds, and doors?
- **Grace:** Having and showing grace, the ability to have grace during pandemic; grace no matter what the social issues are; grace-full because we understand grace; open table; understanding of grace.
- **Democratic:** Two-edged sword, we are bound by that; we try to be inclusive, balanced with a positive and negative side.
- **Outward-directed, community-oriented:** Focuses on community needs – connects with community; involved in mission around the world; mission driven; outreach to the community; servant to the world – we send out what folks need (goods/money), i.e., UMCOR; partnering.
- **Divided:** Diverse but not integrated; welcoming on the surface but deep-down hypocrisy and discrimination; confusion and frustration; animosity and bickering; badly divided – we share values but disagree about how to respond to the issues of today; split personality; not cohesive; fractured; not as open as we claim.
- **Evolving:** Everchanging; adaptable; trying to work around; valuing past while looking to future; vulnerable, recognizing we are not perfect, always trying to be better; aspire to be fully welcoming and engaged in the communities we are part of.
- **Committed to social action and justice:** Justice seeking – true to Wesleyan tradition; equity; want a better society; constantly reaching out – social justice + advocacy.

3. What is different/unique about the UMC?

- **Doctrine/polity:** Book for everything; a method for everything; governance and structure; open to varieties of worship while following basic guidelines; membership classes for new members to understand the “methods”; methodology. Related aspects:
 - Good and bad aspects of the democratic process – this was not initially intended
 - Can promote lack of trust
 - Proportional representation does not necessarily bring equity, balance, or fairness
 - Not authoritarian
 - Fairly legalistic in our polity
 - Clergy and laity accountable
 - Requires theological education for licensed and ordained clergy
- **Global aspect:** Making disciples throughout the world; being actively engaged throughout the world makes us unique; commitment to global work which is expanding; global decision-making and connection; global mission and support; real global connections and action; disaster relief; UMCOR; ready to help.
- **Value and affirm lay people:** Lay empowerment; role of laity is key – special and unique; value more than other denominations; train members to be leaders – lay and clergy; willingness to work with other denominations for the good of the community; strong women’s organization.
- **Grace:** Emphasis on grace, constant ongoing work of the holy spirit individually and as a community, grace upon grace; open communion; open table; grace-filled preaching.
- **Itineracy:** Even the spirit of it when it feels like it’s not always happening in practice – effects the role of the clergy; field preaching and revivals – something about the combination of sawdust trail and educated clergy.
- **Role of women:** Respect role and call of women; women as leaders; equal opportunity for women and men to engage; ordination of women.
- **Diversity:** Wide range of thinking, diverse; openness and flexibility of different expressions of faith; value folks of other cultures and faiths; allowed to disagree; value folks of other cultures and faiths; diversity within our body within the U.S., even more than other denominations in the U.S.
- **Connectional:** relationality; relationships really help build connective tissue; “you are not alone” is not a theological precept that is unique to the UMC but the relationality of how it’s expressed in the UMC is unique; connectional relationship while being strangely independent; theology of immanence that is distinctive – relational understanding not a categorical understanding of God and humanity; connected to the church universal and all Christian traditions.

Mission

4. What is God calling the UMC to do *more of*?

- **Unity:** Stop getting so wrapped up in situations that benefit no one and cause division instead of unity; stop bickering, stop blaming, stop labeling; more active listening to each other; more holy conferencing among people with different or opposing opinions.
- **Be inclusive:** Love one another; stand on love and love alone; live into the open hearts, open minds, open doors; stop drawing lines that keep people out; stand against "-isms" and "phobias" such as ableism, racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, misogyny; be accepting; fully acknowledging and accepting our LGBTQ+ family members; do more work to be a fully open and welcoming church; be inclusive of all – acknowledge racism and heterosexism.
- **Going to people where they are:** Reach more into the community – build community relationships; people are not coming to the UMC – calling us to go beyond the walls of the church; keep finding ways to meet community needs; be in ministry with those hurting; get outside the walls of the church buildings; find ways to do more community relevant ministry that is less about long standing and familiar rituals.
- **Welcoming of youth:** Listen and welcome young people and their values; God calling us to engage in more innovative ministries – more appealing to young families, single people who haven't felt traditional church ministries relevant; youth involvement; reach young people – invest in young people and evangelism.
- **Social justice:** Can't be the tool to transform the world for disciples if we don't live up to our Social Principles; less lagging behind in social issues; wrestle with our Social Principles; social action – led by the people – the members; social holiness work; confront injustice in all forms and build equity for everyone; social justice ministry reaching those on the margins – ethnic and sexual minorities, poor, disabled.
- **Mission:** Encourage more support for mission outside local areas; more support for conference and global missions, i.e., UMCOR, GBGM; be an active voice in our communities as a church on a mission to meet the needs of the world; focus on healing and helping communities become stronger; connecting people with mission and service.
- **Reject racism, reject nationalism:** Intentional decolonization, more contextualization by region; talk more honestly about our past – good at highlighting bright spots and not being honest about inequities the church perpetuates; people love God and the church but are turned off by the nationalism – we need not be afraid to be that voice; talk more honestly about our past; live into love, compassion, justice and peace in ways that are inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-colonial; support and highlight effective anti-racism efforts in our communities.
- **Grace:** Open table of grace; practice the grace we preach; show the love and grace of God to all; grace-filled holy conferencing and dialogue; embody grace.
- **Make disciples:** Really, truly make disciples; our stated mission is "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"; discipleship (including small groups); invest and reinforce discipleship programs; to help create communities of discipleship that create more just communities; can't be the tool to transform the world for disciples if we don't live up to our Social Principles.

5. What keeps us from doing that?

- **UMC is an aging Church:** Inability to attract younger members; Church is predominantly older and prefer to send money/check; dwindling, older church; apathy – especially if you're an older church; members with the energy to serve.
- **Truly listen to hear the other person's perspective:** Listen to understand and do not try to change their way of thinking; need to grow spiritually to accept other viewpoints; misinformation.
- **Mistrust of one another:** People don't have the information about what the UMC did wrong; refusal to name the harm we have done and the pain that exists from the harm the church has done – generations of harm and lasting repercussions.
- **Fighting against ourselves:** Instead of focusing on the mission of church (make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world); being distracted and not unified in our mission as the church; fighting and bickering that have no relevance to mission of the church.
- **Exclusivity:** All about us, don't want outsiders; judgement about who should be in and who should be out; make people feel unwelcome; targeting people who want full inclusion; lack vision to see how others can be included; unwillingness to engage with groups who are different.
- **Fear; fear of:**
 - rejection
 - losing all the hard work that's been put into making church, church
 - what people will think of us
 - difference
 - contracting COVID
 - change
 - taking risks
 - biblical interpretation
 - speaking up
 - being vulnerable
 - stepping on someone's toes
- **Uncertainty:** We can't agree on what the priorities are; internal struggles have us paralyzed; politics – when people start drawing a line in the sand and they are not willing to listen to each other – makes it very hard to move forward – at an impasse; we should be working for others, yet we are squabbling about opinions.
- **Structures:** All things needing to go through General Conference; democratic process; legalism of polity and doctrine; built institutional churches; rigidity; governance and structure, polity hinders us; General Conference paralyzing in a way.
- **Wrong focus:** Looking to the wrong places for success in ministry – too much at numbers and physical structures not the inbreaking of the spirit; social clubs masquerading as churches; public message of the last 50 years of argument is not helpful; what holds us together is energy, not structures.

Vision

6. What would make being a United Methodist even better?

- **Attract the younger generation:** Conversations with our youth to determine what would be more meaningful for them, thereby making the Church more attractive; assigning young people activities – young people want to do something; really allow younger people to lead; attract and engage more young adults, families, youth presence; succession plan with the next generation in mind; getting information out to young people to continue as clergy; strengthen our work with those under 35; being able to tell the younger generations that the church values the things that they value and that there is a place of belonging for all the people they care about, including their queer friends, people of color, women, and indigenous peoples; If churches cared enough to change to reach young people.
- **Take church outside of the walls and get to know the community;** congregations involved in the community; welcoming starts outside the church; get out of our churches and meet the community better; Church with an outward focus – prioritizes people over institution; a reduced reliance on local church buildings and an increased reliance on relationship and life in community – especially community outside the walls of church buildings.
- **Focus on commonalities more – not only on differences;** more positive connotation to “Methodist” than splitting and fighting; listen to each other better even when have different opinions; more giving than taking attitude; agree to disagree; don’t harbor grudges; no longer having the threat of split hanging over us; connection through common/shared understanding and application of what we believe; less judging, more loving and serving, and open to God’s gift of diversity among people; if we could focus more on our positive vision for the world rather than our own conflicts and desire for survival; if we would focus on making disciples who are encouraged to live like Jesus, not requiring people to conform to a rigid set of doctrines or defining the “right” way to be a disciple.
- **Inclusiveness:** Welcome gifts of all; accept all are created/designed by God; unconditional love and acceptance of everyone; don’t set limits on who sits next to you in the pew; let go of bitterness to be more open; being the inclusive church that we talk about; Christian dogma keeps our focus on exclusion; accepting of people regardless of how/who they love; hope for more inclusive church that allows for ordination of LGBTQIA clergy; open-mindedness; removing the judgment of others with differences, including race and LGBTQ; inclusion of all persons – regardless of race, age, gender or orientation.
- **Connection across the world:** Stop the us and them – we are a global church; gaining appreciation across cultures; uniqueness of people and people groups; intercultural competency; appreciation and sensitivity to multiculturalism; what does a diverse tradition look like lived; greater connection between annual conferences and central conferences; being a global church that regardless of where people are they know what to expect in the core values and beliefs; If we could stop fighting about who gets a seat at the table, and focus on doing ministry together.
- **Make wrongs right:** Conferences are returning land to Indigenous people; land and buildings returned for community centers, wrong needs to be made right to achieve forgiveness; engage people relationally in the hard truths of our past; willingly addressing injustice and giving priority to the voices of the disempowered instead of maintaining the majority rule that has led us to

the present difficulties; deal with its racism – all the isms; justice and peace in ways that are inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-colonial; a focus on anti-racism and anti-colonialism.

- **Being able to adapt the *Book of Discipline*:** Not just for regionalization, but also for things like COVID, which caught us all by surprise; not being "stuck" in our own rulebook, but being more flexible for ministry and mission; being liberated from polity, politics, structure, organization, and business to truthfully focus on mission and vision; adaptability keeping our polity relevant to our radically changing world; our interaction with the world has been held back by our denominational anti-LGBTQA+ dictates in the *Book of Discipline*; a less USA-dependent and USA-centered denomination, one that has a global book of discipline and an equitable regional structure; simplifying the *Discipline*, altering the purpose of General and Jurisdictional Conference.
- **Embrace the challenges of adaptation:** Be dynamic and evolving; focus on freedom of where we are going; listening to each other; when presented with change, truly listen to the proposals that are coming and listening for success as opposed to failure; focusing on Christ as our center while being truly open to diversity of opinion on other matters; an ability to see our ministry models evolve into the 21st century; accepting the culture of various generations is as important as accepting cultures of other ethnicities.

Connectionalism

7. How does our church live out its connectionalism?

- **Meet the community's needs:** Reaches out to other UMCs in the community; invite other churches in the conference; by interacting and sharing between congregants, other churches, districts, conferences; have churches to work together in community; connecting ecumenically; recognize the importance of stepping out to connect with other denominations in the community to do things in your community.
- **Cooperative churches:** Multiple churches come together for study, fellowship and missional outreach; work on joint projects with other UMC in the district; connection with the conference – very supportive; calls us to step out – different districts; work together.
- **Mission work:** Our presence in places around the globe means the church is ready to mobilize; regional missionaries; UMCOR; UWFaith; Africa University; emergency response training; strong connection with missionary conferences; churches participating locally as well as globally; the mission work that the conference supports enables us to do more than by ourselves.
- **Structure and mission of the UMC:** Need, however, to teach members who don't always know who we are; need good communication to the local level because many don't fully understand the connectionalism; members don't understand it if they haven't experienced anything outside local; not fully understanding or sensing the connectionalism beyond UMCOR; apportionments – people don't understand how apportionments are spent and why they are important; shared decision-making; no dictator – mixed blessing; democracy in polity.
- **Regionalism:** Should have expression in our regionalism – don't want to feel like we are exactly the same; as an antidote to colonialism; discussion about regionalism is needed with our members, envisioning what it could look like; opportunity to allow for the different realities in each region, create rules by region with different goals and objectives; seems that the connectional structure is strong enough to allow those differences to co-exist.
- **Shared, pooled resources:** From annual conferences and agencies for the local churches; annual conference focuses on local churches, hold local churches together; agencies working together; many programs – creating opportunities; offerings broader; resources for district and conference events and ministries; apportionments connect us to resources we don't tap into; pool our financial resources such as apportionments to share our expertise; becoming a direct resource to local churches.

In Closing

This report provides *key themes* illuminated from the U.S. discussion groups conducted to share perspectives that explored and sought to define The United Methodist Church (UMC) identity, mission, vision, and connectionalism. The content shares those viewpoints most-often stated when looking across the many group discussions.

The Connectional Table is most grateful for the time of all those who graciously participated in a discussion group whether as participants, facilitators and/or scribes. The themes gathered here along with those from discussion groups held in Europe, the Philippines, and Africa will help guide the future vision for the church as well as to undergird how learnings about identity and vision might shape global regionalization, connectionalism, and mission.

May the insights gleaned from the discussion groups support United Methodists in their mission to *make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*.

For a compilation of all the U.S. summaries provided to the Connectional Table, please see the separate **Appendix**.

Connectional Table Visioning Conversations: U.S. Discussion Groups Themes

Discussion Guide and Questions

Welcome, Ground Rules & Confidentiality

(10 minutes)

Welcome

Thank you for coming. My name is [*insert name of moderator here*]. I'm an [*insert brief bio here*]. I'll be leading this discussion on behalf of the Connectional Table.

Ground Rules

- We are participating in a focus group because you were selected to share your insights on a particular topic: Identity, Vision, Mission and Connectionalism of The United Methodist Church.
- I have a set of questions designed by the Connectional Table specifically for this discussion.
- Please share your honest feelings and insights—there are no “wrong” answers.
- Please silence cell phones (and if someone enters the room or you have to talk, please mute your microphone).
- Please stay until the end of the group.
- Talk one at a time; speak clearly and loudly for the group to hear.
- We may have to limit how much you say so we can hear from everyone. If this happens, please be assured this is only in the interest of time and full participation from the group.
- Know that this discussion will not identify any individual responses, thus ensuring your confidentiality. In the interest of confidentiality for the whole group, we ask that you not share any information from our discussion with others.

Overarching Objective & Introductions

(10 minutes)

The overall objective of this focus group discussion is to gather information that explores and seeks to define The United Methodist Church identify, mission, vision and connectionalism during this time of transition. This information will be used to guide The UMC as the church casts a vision for the future.

Introductions

Please introduce yourself. Share your name, location, your role in the church and something that brings you joy.

Connectional Table Visioning Conversations: U.S. Discussion Groups Themes

Questions

Identity

(25 minutes)

- How would you describe the values of the UMC?
- What words come to mind when you think about the personality of the UMC?
- What is different/unique about the UMC?

Mission

(15 minutes)

- What is God calling the UMC to do *more of*?
- What keeps us from doing that?

Vision

(10 minutes)

- What would make being a United Methodist even better?

Connectionalism

(10 minutes)

- How does our church live out its connectionalism?

Closing

(10 minutes)

Please share any final remarks. Are there any questions you wish we would have asked? Are there any people you think we should speak with about this topic?