

# **Commission on General Conference Report to the General Conference 2022**

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## **Introduction**

Following the 2019 General Conference, and in response to a proposal to establish a commission to examine conferences, the Governing Board of Metropolitan Community Churches announced the creation of the Commission on General Conference in May 2020 to evaluate our triennial meetings.

Since then, the Commission on General Conference (CGC, also referred to as the Commission) has been meeting to learn the story of General Conferences, look at data, research other denominational gatherings, and will ultimately offer a proposal for how General Conferences in the future might be shaped.

Due to COVID-19, we have all been put in a position of evaluating how we gather, whilst learning new ways of being the church. 2020 turned out to be the perfect time to have these conversations about how and why we gather as a denomination. The 2022 General Conference team decided to move the conference online, because of the pandemic, giving us all another way to think about and experience General Conference.

In light of this drastic change in the General Conference structure, the Governing Board has graciously granted the Commission to offer its final recommendations after the 2022 General Conference. Therefore, we can learn from this experience of having a fully online conference for the first time in MCC's history.

In the coming pages you will find a summary of the work and our thinking so far as we set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main goals General Conference should accomplish?

2. Does General Conference give people a sense of unity and direction? If so, how and to what extent?
3. How should the business of MCC be conducted in a way that is accessible, fair, and spacious?
4. How can we best meet the physical and financial needs of conference attendees given shifting demographics?
5. How do networks, affinity group meetings etc, fit into the conference structure?
6. Are there innovative ways we can seek to build new partnerships when planning conferences, network gatherings, affinity group meetings, skills-based learning etc.
7. With technology changing rapidly making meaningful connections more accessible and opportunity more equitable, how might General Conference change in shape and scope?

While working on the above questions, we added foundational questions to guide our work including: Who is the audience of General Conference? What is the purpose of General Conference? How often, what time of year, and where should General Conference occur?

## Background and Trends

After the 2007 General Conference, MCC transitioned to holding General Conference every three years: 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019. Moving away from Regions, members started meeting in less-structured Networks, leaving all official business and voting to occur at our triennial General Conference Business Meetings, except in special cases where we have been able to implement virtual voting.

Total General Conference attendance tends to ebb and flow. In 2010 in Acapulco, there were 886 registrants; in 2013 in Chicago, 1,101; in 2016 in Victoria, 824; and in Orlando, there were 854. For each conference, about 50% of attendees were voting Clergy or Lay Delegates.

Despite the desire to have more participation from outside of the United States (U.S), especially in our locations outside of the U.S., attendance from our global population has been fairly stagnant with 88-89% being from the U.S. in the last few General Conferences.

On average, the General Conference population has also aged. In Acapulco, 10% of our conference attendees were 65+, 17% in Chicago, 25% in Victoria, 31% Orlando. All numbers in each progressive decade have been decreasing except the 26 and below category which has stayed steady at 6%.

The last major factor affecting General Conference attendance is funding. For the last three Conferences, about 70% of conference attendees were self-funded, this is a 10% increase from 59% in Acapulco.

Throughout MCC's entire history, General Conferences, previously called Jubilees, have been ways for people to connect, share struggles, brainstorm ideas, create meaningful relationships, and set the direction of our Global movement. At their best, conferences and gatherings reduce isolation and help us to vision together to discern where God is calling MCC to focus our attention. Our goal for this Commission is to find the best ways to continue this rich tradition while also mindful of the ways our population and its needs are changing.

## **Strategy**

The CGC is comprised of members from various experience and chaired by the two current General Conference Co-Directors. Throughout the process, our team has utilised reports, 1-1 interviews, focus groups, and surveys to learn the right questions and seek input from a variety of experiences. To start off our process we conducted a number of focus group-like Dream Sessions. Read more about those below.

For a full list of our Commission members, please see the closing salutation of this report. We especially want to thank Rev. Paul Whiting, UFMCC Governing Board and Rev. Emily Worman, Pastor, Church in Progress MCC, Auckland, New Zealand for their service to the Commission in its infancy, who helped up to birth this process and objectives.

## **Dream Sessions**

We are very conscious that, as a small group, CGC members bring their own expectations, experiences and ideas. Whilst this is valuable, we also seek to prioritise the voices of those who are not on the Commission. We imagined our Dream Sessions as a way to kick-off our work with MCCers from a variety of experiences, in order to move beyond just capturing data in a survey and spark imaginations deeper when connecting with others. We asked MCCers to imagine what a global gathering could look like. We invited MCC folk, who both had and had not previously attended a General Conference, to join us over Zoom on various days and in various time zones. Providing time to explore what has been and what should be important, we asked everyone to dream and be creative about all possibilities. These Dream Sessions were an exciting way for us to hear the yearning people have to gather, and were instrumental in the creation of our focus areas. We were able to use these ideas, expertise, and hopes to help guide our subcommittee work and to prioritise how we used our time during our larger commission meetings. We are particularly grateful for a team of volunteer translators and breakout group leaders who helped us to hear the dreams of more folk than commission members alone could facilitate. Some suggestions from the dream sessions are even being implemented in the 2022 General Conference!

## **Fractal Leadership**

To enable us to work on several aspects of General Conference simultaneously, we adopted a fractal organisational structure. Essentially, we created a series of subcommittees, led by one or two members of the Commission, each of which has smaller scopes of interest. These CGC members report back to the larger group in monthly meetings so we can progress our overarching vision in a congruent manner (rather than each committee generating incompatible suggestions or priorities). This also means that we can invite contributions and support from a more diverse group of people with experience and/or expertise in specific areas. Even after the 2022 General Conference, we will continue to work in this way as we finalise recommendations. We hope this approach will enrich what we can offer to the General Conference and create the best recommendations we can. We are working to centralise inclusion, accessibility, and finances as key areas which will have greater influence on recommendations than others as they touch each aspect of General Conference. What follows is a short summary of each subcommittee's key questions and work so far. We are very grateful to the listed people for sharing their talents and a considerable amount of their time with us.

## **Preliminary Subcommittee Reports**

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

**Lead:** Rev. Brendan Boone & Rev. Kate Harford

**Team Members:** Debbie Blanton, Rev. Catherine Dearlove and Kellie Taylor-White

Originally constituted as an Accessibility Team, the committee employed a wider lens to review past practices related to diversity, inclusion, and accessibility at General Conferences. Hence, the name of the Diversity and Inclusion Subcommittee.

This team did a comprehensive review to make specific and general recommendations for consideration and possible adoption when planning future General Conferences. Due to the enormity of topics under the canopy of diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, the subcommittee narrowed its scope to focus on four (4) major areas

1. Reviewing past practices used to ensure General Conferences are fully accessible to all disabled persons.
2. Reviewing past practices used to ensure General Conferences reflect the diversity of members, friends, and allies of MCC.
3. Reviewing past practices used to ensure General Conferences create an atmosphere reflective of MCC's commitment to being fully inclusive and including of all persons who are part of MCC.

4. Making specific recommendations regarding each of these and other associated areas to be used in preparing for future General Conferences.

While not exhaustive by any means, the four (4) major areas were then broken down into seven (7) categories which will be highlighted in a final report:

1. Travel and Transportation
2. Finances and Financial Needs
3. Hotel/Venue Considerations for Disabled People
4. Accessibility Considerations for Disabled People
5. Inclusive/Expansive Language/Theologies
6. Trans\*, Non-Binary, and Gender Non-Conforming Visibility
7. Parents with Infants, Children and Youth

In an effort to include the voices of MCCers from around the globe, the subcommittee created the “MCC Commission on General Conference: Disability and Accessibility Stories” survey. We invited others to share their experiences as a disabled person regarding full access during a General Conference. In addition to English, the survey was translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and German and distributed through MCC CONNECT and social media. We are grateful to those who responded and for the stories they shared.

As the subcommittee’s work moved forward, it became clear these observations and recommendations should be established as the minimum expectations for MCC and its various networks. The subcommittee will continue to refine recommendations for all types of conferences from an Accessibility and Diversity standpoint.

## **Finance Team**

**Lead:** Chad Hobbs & Rev. Marsha Warren

**Team Members:** Liz Bisordi, Barb Crabtree and Rev. Craig Cranston

The Finance team focused on examining the tension between the desire for increased connection between MCC leaders around the world and the financial and physical realities of bringing people together. Ideally, the Finance Team suggests, a General Conference will:

- Allow MCC to conduct business on a regular and planned cycle, including election of leaders, making changes to bylaws, and enabling the body to receive and consider reports from initiatives like the Statement of Faith Commission or the General Conference Commission.
- Build increased awareness and sense of connection and mission between MCC leaders around the world.
- Provide opportunities for learning from each other and from leading scholars and theologians.
- Minimise the financial impact on local churches, clergy, and lay leaders.

- Achieve the financial goals of the conference.

Initially focussing on the financial history of General Conference as it pertains to the denomination, the committee is now shifting to look at the financial implications not only to the movement, but also to congregations and individuals to recommend a conference structure that reinforces connection and fiscal responsibility.

## **Programming**

**Lead:** Jude Litzenberger and Rev. Elder Hector Gutiérrez

**Team Members:** Rev. Michelle Kirby, Isabel Marquez, Rev. Nathan Meckley and Dr. Carla Sherrell

The Programming Team started its work by examining best practices for learning in a global environment considering online learning and in-person learning. The subcommittee then moved to look more closely at the Commission's objective to centralise accessibility, inclusion, and Diversity. Bridging these tasks, they have made the following observations:

1. To live into a more global and diverse identity, MCC's privileged locations, needs, and convenience, or systems of power (i.e. clergy-centric, primarily white, U.S. centric, naivete about the world outside the US), must be de-centred.
2. A single, centralised, in-person gathering does not best suit the diverse needs and access issues for our global movement.
3. If the General Conference moves away from a single, centralised gathering, it is unlikely that the majority of the General Conference activity could be globally synchronous even if done online/virtually.
4. Continued innovation in technology by monitoring of new applications, emerging platforms, and tools which can support various MCC programming should continue to be a planning priority.
5. For in-person conferences, there is a continued opportunity for Conference participants, curriculum, presentations, and events to connect to the local and regional communities of locations where Conference will be held in-person in order to increase opportunities for dialogue, shared initiatives, even shared events to allow growth in MCC becoming a more just, global organisation, and for deeper partnerships to be established even after Conference. Creative thinking might also create opportunities for such relationships to be established with online events as well.

Based on these observations, the subcommittee is creating emerging recommendations for various types of conference structures to be accessible and inclusive in every way possible.

## **Business Team**

**Lead:** Rev. Elder Cecilia Eggleston and Al Chapman

In addition to the original charge of the CGC, the Governing Board requested that the CGC also review how UFMCC conducts its business at General Conference, including the following motion, which was passed at GC2019:

*Motion for the incoming Moderator and Governing Board to form a committee to review and analyze the current Clergy House and Lay House delegate(s) structures; and make recommendations to the General Conference on viable alternatives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century MCC.*

The Business Team started its work thinking about the structure of the Business and examining whose voices are typically heard and whose are not with our current model. Then, with the shift of the Business to be online for the 2022 General Conference, the team has become the bones of the General Conference Procedures Team to test out and dream of some new ways of conducting business given an opportunity to try out an all-online platform. GC 2022 will inevitably have its flaws, and will offer a greater opportunity to examine a new global democratic process which will be invaluable to the forthcoming recommendations of this Commission.

## **Next Steps**

Following the 2022 General Conference and evaluations of the conference, the Commission will re-start its work to examine the scope, nature, purpose, and organisation of General Conferences. Likely, this will culminate in a series of Bylaw proposals presented to the voting members of MCC in a forthcoming virtual meeting.

We look forward to continuing to dream with you as we evaluate and potentially suggest changes to the ways we do General Conference in order to more fully engage our global movement.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Brendan Boone, Daytona Beach, Florida, USA

Dr. Al Chapman, Northern Lights MCC, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Rev. Elder Cecilia Eggleston, MCC Moderator, Portishead, United Kingdom

Rev. Elder Héctor Gutiérrez, UFMCC Staff, Guadalajara, Mexico

Mr. Chad Hobbs, UFMCC Governing Board Treasurer/MCC Tampa, USA

Ms. Jude Litzenberger, UFMCC Network Facilitator/The Met, San Diego, California, USA

Rev. Lauren Bennett, UFMCC Staff/Associate Pastor MCC Greater St. Louis, Missouri, USA  
(Co-Chair)

Mr. Mike Haase, UFMCC Staff/Minister of Music All God's Children MCC Minneapolis,  
Minnesota, USA (Co-Chair)