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A LETTER TO THOSE DISCERNING A CALL TO SERVE AS A DELEGATE TO THE 2026 GENERAL CONFERENCE

As you discern whether to serve as a Delegate to the 2026 General Conference, the current Alaska delegation has reflected on what it takes to be a delegate, what they learned, and what they think is important for potential candidates to consider.

Some may remember way back in 2018, when the Alaska Conference elected its previous delegation, with one clergy and lay delegate with three alternates for each. They were:

> Clergy: Jim Doepken, alternates: Dan Wilcox, Lisa Talbott, Bennie Grace Nabua
> Lay: Jo Anne Hayden, alternates: Lonnie Brooks, Fran Lynch, Kelly Marciales

The first alternates joined the "first elects" as delegates to the Jurisdictional Conference, while remaining members served as alternates for both Conferences.

Jo Anne Hayden reminds those who might be discerning that, *"They are committing to being a member of the Alaska delegation from the point of election until the next election of an Alaskan delegation happens - typically four years."*

So, What Does It Take to Serve as a General Conference Delegate?

In The United Methodist Church, the call to serve as a delegate to General Conference is first and most importantly a weighty responsibility. It is also a great honor, providing a delegate with an opportunity to use that status to further the mission of the Church; to make disciples and transform the world. It is a role that connects the local church to the global body of Christ—where decisions made in one place ripple outward across continents, cultures, and congregations.

But what does it really take to serve in this way?

Those of us who have walked this path offer some guidance. These reflections reveal that this is not simply a leadership position—it is a calling that requires discernment, humility, endurance, and faith.

A Call Rooted in Prayer and Discernment

At its core, serving as a delegate begins not with ambition, but with calling.

Fran Lynch reminds us that this work must be grounded in prayer at every stage: *"Remember to pray before, during and after any kind of encounter or prep work."* The complexity of the work—and the weight of its decisions—requires more than intellect or strategy. It requires a continual surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Jim Doepken echoes this sense of calling, remembering his own discernment process: *"I felt a clear calling to serve as a delegate—to serve the Alaska Conference… and to help shape what the church might become."* That sense of purpose carried him into a role that demanded far more than he initially anticipated.

Discernment, then, is not just about whether one *can* serve, but whether one is prepared to offer their time, energy, and spirit to the work of the whole church.

A Significant Commitment of Time and Energy

If there is one theme that emerges consistently, it is this: the role requires a tremendous investment of time.

Lonnie Brooks speaks candidly: *"There is almost no way to overestimate the amount of your time you will be expected… to commit to the work."* While General Conference itself lasts only a couple of weeks, that time is, in his words, *"a drop in the ocean."*

Preparation begins years in advance. Delegates are elected well before the conference and begin meeting shortly afterward. Pastor JoJo Nabua reminds us that what was expected to be a four-year commitment stretched into eight years due to the postponed 2020 General Conference. During that time, the delegation met monthly, studied legislation, and prepared for multiple conferences across the connection.

Kelly Marciales adds that delegates should expect *"regular, bi-monthly meetings and as GC approaches, the frequency may increase."* (This is particularly true as delegates prepare for potential episcopal elections at Jurisdictional Conference.) For many, this also means

taking time away from work or family responsibilities—especially for lay delegates who must often use personal time off.

The work is not confined to meetings alone. Delegates are tasked with reading extensive materials—thousands of pages of petitions, reports, and agency updates. As Lonnie notes, this includes not only legislative proposals but also the work of general agencies, seminaries, and global ministries.

This is not a passive role. It is one that demands sustained attention, discipline, and sacrifice.

And everyone needs to be aware that the time commitment is greater for the "heads of the delegation" so that the team can work together to bear some of that load.

Learning the Work of the Wider Church

Serving as a delegate offers a unique window into the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church.

Fran describes it as a shift in perspective: *"This level of church management affects the local church, but functions differently… much more corporate kind of thinking."* Delegates must learn how decisions are made at a global level—how legislation is shaped, debated, and enacted.

Kelly highlights the responsibility of understanding how General Conference impacts both budget and governance: *"General Conference sets the budget for the global church… and there will be major reconstructive work to do regarding our polity and doctrine."*

This learning curve can be steep, especially for first-time delegates. Yet it is also deeply formative. As Jim reflects, the experience *"offers a deeper appreciation for the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church."*

The Importance of Collaboration and Relationships

No delegate serves alone.

From the beginning, delegates are part of a team—working within their conference delegation and building relationships across our episcopal area, jurisdictions and around the world. Fran emphasizes the importance of this shared work: *"You are part of the team so that no one stands alone."*

Networking and collaboration are essential, not optional. Delegates rely on one another to share information, divide responsibilities, and discern together. They also engage with other delegations, building relationships that are critical for effective work on the conference floor.

Lonnie underscores that much of the legislative process depends on these relationships: negotiations, compromises, and coalition-building often happen in long hours beyond formal sessions.

This work extends beyond General Conference itself. Delegates may be asked to serve on boards or committees for general agencies—roles that carry additional responsibilities and time commitments going forward.

A Sacred and Global Experience

Amid the demands, there is also deep joy and meaning.

Pastor Dan Wilcox reflects on the beauty of witnessing the global church gathered in one place: *"It is a remarkable experience to be in a space with delegates from all over the world… and yet all serve Christ and his church."*

He recalls a simple but profound moment—meeting a delegate from Kenya with the same name as his own child and, through this, discovering a shared connection. What began as a casual conversation became a reminder of the unity and diversity of the body of Christ.

Kelly similarly describes General Conference as *"one of the most holy, beautiful worship experiences I've ever attended."* Even in the midst of legislative work, there are moments of worship, connection, and grace that reveal the church at its best.

Pastor JoJo Nabua echoes this, calling the experience *"deeply meaningful and rewarding—truly holy work."* Through the challenges, there is also the privilege of serving alongside faithful leaders and contributing to the life of the global church.

It is because of this global experience at General Conference and the Western Jurisdictional Conference that Lonnie says it is critical you *"have a relatively good grasp of political processes for making group decisions."*

Responsibility, Humility, and Trust

Finally, serving as a delegate requires a deep sense of responsibility.

Delegates are entrusted not simply to represent opinions, but to discern faithfully. Fran offers this important reminder: *"You are not voting the way the delegation or the conference… has told you to vote. You have been entrusted with the authority to vote as you are led."*

This is a sacred trust. It calls for humility, integrity, and a willingness to listen—to God, to one another, and to the broader church.

It also requires honesty about one's capacity. The current delegation offers a gentle but firm word: if one is not prepared for the work, it may not be the right time to serve. The role is too important to approach halfheartedly. There may be other commitments in your life that you will need to drop during this time. Be prepared for this.

A Call Worth Considering

So, what does it take to serve as a General Conference delegate?

- It takes prayerful discernment.
- It takes time and commitment.
- It takes a willingness to learn, collaborate, and engage deeply.
- It takes humility and courage to discern God's leading.

And above all, it takes a heart for the church—not just the local congregation, but the global body of Christ.

For those who feel this call, the journey is demanding—but it is also rich with purpose, connection, and grace.

As you consider whether this might be your next step in ministry or leadership, take time to pray, reflect, and listen. The church needs faithful servants who are willing to step into this work—not for power or position, but for the sake of Christ and the future of the church.

Please feel free to reach out to any members of your 2020/2024 delegation as you discern.

In Christ,

Jo Anne Hayden, Lonnie Brooks, Fran Lynch, Kelly Marciales
Jim Doepken, Dan Wilcox, Lisa Talbott, Bennie Grace Nabua