

Bishop Term Limits: UMC vs GMC

What are “guaranteed appointments” for clergy?

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How long can a bishop serve?

In the United States, bishops of the UMC normally serve in one conference area for up to two terms, but they can continue for a third term with special approval of their jurisdictional conference. A “term” is defined as a quadriennium or four year time period. Bishops are elected for life and serve in their assignment until retirement. Retirement for bishops is required by the Book of Discipline to be made official at the jurisdictional conference following their 68th birthday, with a mandatory retirement at age 72.¹

How are bishops selected?

Bishops are elected by the jurisdictional conferences in the United States and by the central conferences in Africa, Europe and the Philippines. Any elder in full connection is eligible to be elected a bishop. Nominations or endorsements of individuals are common, but not necessary for election. The number of votes needed to elect a bishop is determined by each jurisdictional and central conference but the church’s Book of Discipline recommends at least 60 percent of those present and voting be necessary to elect. Bishops consecrated at the jurisdictional conferences begin their assignments September 1.²

What is the problem? In short, term limits are needed.

For many General Conferences, legislation has been proposed to allow term limits for bishops and essentially not receive a “guaranteed appointment”. All such attempts have not passed as of 2022.

Traditionalists have long fought for this policy due to many bishops repeatedly defying the will of the General Conference. One such example is the election of Bishop Karen Oliveto, an open lesbian, to the office of bishop in the Mountain sky conference in the year 2016. This election was in defiance of official United Methodist polity and the majority of bishops at the time allowed her election.

There is a long-standing concern that bishops are only accountable to themselves. Term limits would help bring accountability to the Council of Bishops. There are also serious questions regarding retired bishops utilizing their tenured status with a distinct lack of accountability.³

¹ <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/faq/how-long-can-a-bishop-serve-12780397>

² <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/faq/how-are-bishops-selected-12780395>

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<https://www.umnews.org/-/media/umc-media/2016/03/31/21/37/bishop-study-task-force-report.ashx?la=en&hash=F8CB2C30F8B64CE93D10A5311E55F444B3B52921>

Bishops are supposed to “defend the faith/maintain the unity of the Church” and uphold the will of the General Conference (the deciding body of the UMC), but if bishops only enforce the parts with which they agree, then the decisions of the General Conference are invalidated.

According to the Global Methodist Church’s Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline (see paragraph 516.2) GMC bishops will only serve for defined term limits.⁴ Once they serve their terms, they will either return to ministry in a local church or to some other area of service in the general church. It is widely assumed the delegates to the Global Methodist Church’s convening General Conference will endorse term limits for GMC bishops.⁵

What is a guaranteed appointment for a pastor/elder?

According to the 2008 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, “Every effective elder in full connection who is in good standing shall be continued under appointment by the bishop...” (§334.1) For many years, there was an ongoing conversation about changing the “shall” in this paragraph to “may.”

This change occurred at the 2012 UMC General Conference in Tampa. The “shall” became a “may”.⁶

The benefit of the guaranteed appointment system is the assurance of all clergy persons to find a place to serve, regardless of gender or ethnicity. However, the negative side is that it perpetuates ineffective clergy in the connectional system who should not be serving. There are some in the United Methodist Church who want to continue to do away with the guaranteed appointment and base appointments on effectiveness and/or moral/spiritual maturity, and not elder status alone.

What does this have to do with bishops? The current official stance of the UMC is a non-guaranteed appointment system for local church clergy. Likewise, the GMC will have a non-guaranteed appointment system.⁷ Like the local church elder who has a non-guaranteed appointment, bishops should be held to the same standards of accountability regarding performance and effectiveness.

⁴ <https://globalmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Transitional-Discipline.2022041257.pdf>

⁵ <https://globalmethodist.org/faqs/#1626101490173-259c8b8a-2ea2> (bottom of page)

⁶ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/general-conference-votes-to-end-guaranteed-appointments>

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<https://peopleneedjesus.net/2022/08/19/global-game-changers-ending-guaranteed-appointments/comment-page-1/>