

NIGERIA PATH FORWARD COVENANT

Healing, Unity and Stronger United Methodist Witness Across Nigeria

A Report and Actions For The United Methodist Church of Nigeria
Including congregations, laity, pastors and conference officials,

From The Bishop of Nigeria, the President of the West Africa College of Bishops
and a delegation of clergy from Nigeria and representatives of the Council of Bishops

March 31, 2024

A History of Internal and External Influence

The Nigeria Annual Conference has experienced significant challenges that created internal misunderstandings, mistrust and division among laity, clergy and Conference leadership. The division was deepened by the divisions in other parts of the world-wide United Methodist Church. Various caucus groups have been vying for Nigerians to support their interests without regard for how their lobbying impacts the United Methodists of Nigeria. Also, non-United Methodist denominational leaders have engaged in Nigeria and are recruiting people to leave The United Methodist Church and join the Global Methodist Church which left The United Methodist Church and formed a new denomination in 2022. All of this has created confusion, misunderstanding and harm to the United Methodist Church of Nigeria. The Nigeria Annual Conference is not alone in these experiences but may experience the impact more acutely because of its history and national challenges.

As a nation, Nigeria has gone through colonialism and a struggle for its independence. The nation is often described as a nation divided between North and South, Muslim and Christian, different tribes, poverty and internal political challenges. The National division and conflict has also crept into The United Methodist Church of Nigeria.

As a church, the United Methodists of Nigeria has grown by more than 800,000 members over the last 25 years and has been served by six bishops in the last 20 years. Three of the bishops were interim assignments after two bishops became ill and died during their tenure. The present Bishop, John Wesley Yohanna, will complete his tenure as Bishop of The United Methodist Church of Nigeria at the Central Conference Session later this year. This will mean another transition of its leader. The rapid growth and continual change in leadership created further stress and challenges for the Nigeria United Methodist Church.

Church and national challenges have destabilized the Nigerian Annual Conferences, created internal differences, division and struggle for power. The Honorable Justice Bala K. M. Usman dismissed a lawsuit brought by some United Methodists against other United Methodists in Nigeria with the following statement:

...this Honorable Court found that this Application (lawsuit) borders on leadership tussle in a religious organization (United Methodist Church of Nigeria)... -20th day of July 2023.

A Call for Prayer

The public witness of The United Methodist Church of Nigeria has been compromised because of these challenges and internal struggles. **All of this calls for not only Nigerian United Methodists but all United Methodists to be in prayer** for The United Methodist Church of Nigeria and to not create further harm through actions or inactions that undermine Nigerian leadership at all levels of the church and seek to divide the church further through interests of individuals and groups outside of Nigeria that seek support for their goals and interests.

Possibility and Hope in the Midst of the Challenges

With all that has occurred, The United Methodist Church of Nigeria is one of the most vibrant and growing Episcopal Areas within all of United Methodism. It has gifted laity and clergy who seek to do their best to serve Christ and his Church and to be faithful to God's calling. It is starting new faith communities and congregations regularly. New young persons are responding to the call of ministry and dedicated leadership at all levels of the church. Clergy and laity are demonstrating fruitfulness and effectiveness.

Searching for a Path Forward

In the midst of a prolonged conflict, a delegation of the West Africa College of Bishops, supported by a team from the Council of Bishops met with leaders representing all views of the conflict for an in-person meeting on March 20-21, 2024 with the aim of searching for a path forward. Together, they became aware that it was imperative for themselves, and the leadership involved in the leadership "tussle" to repent, pray, look to the Holy Spirit's guidance and work toward the healing and unity within The United Methodist Church of Nigeria. Their guiding principle was to identify a path forward that honored Jesus Christ, advanced the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church in Nigeria and improve and grow the United Methodist public witness to draw more people to Christ Jesus and be a beacon of light and hope within the Nation.

To accomplish this, the gathered leaders committed to begin working together according to the following plan and actions with the active support of the Bishops involved in the gathering. Together we call on all United Methodists of Nigeria to pray and work together to accomplish the following plan and actions. There are three parts to the plan:

1. Reduce Further Harm by withdrawing Civil and Church Complaints
2. Create Clarity, Understanding and Address Issues
3. Create Space for Healing and Growing Unity

Actions to Reduce Further Harm Concerning Civil and Church Complaints

Goal: Create space for healing by withdrawing complaints and lawsuits related to the leadership "tussle."

Actions:

1. Leaders will instruct their lawyers or other appropriate persons to withdraw their civil lawsuits, their police complaints and church complaints related to matters of leadership and division against any leader in The United Methodist Church and resolve all matters by:

- a. Working together through the biblical mandate of Matthew 18:15-17¹.
- b. Church facilitated processes that focus on honoring Jesus Christ and furthering the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church in Nigeria.

Complaints are to be withdrawn by June 1, 2024.

2. Leaders will call for their groups to withdraw all church complaints against any Nigerian United Methodist related to the matters concerning leadership and division and instead work together through the processes and actions outlined in this document and work toward healing and unity. Complaints to be withdrawn by June 1, 2024.
3. Conduct a review of all Annual Conference Session actions from the 2020 Session the most recent March 2024 Session to determine if any action was taken that is not in compliance with The Book of Discipline or Conference Rules. If any action was taken that was not in compliance with The Book of Discipline, it will be brought into compliance at a called June 1, 2024 Special Session of all four Annual Conferences. At this same Session new elections for conference leadership will be held as required following a General Conference Session with each Conference electing its own leaders. The review shall be conducted by the Council of Bishop's Chancellor, the Mediating Bishop, and a Bishop named by the West Africa College of Bishops in consultation with the United Methodist chancellors of Nigeria. The review and report is to be completed by September 1, 2024.

Measurement: Lawsuits, Police Complaints/Cases and all Church Complaints will be withdrawn by the dates listed above and a Special Session of the Annual Conferences to be held June 1, 2024.

Monitored by a member of the mediation team to ensure timely completion and provide weekly reports to the President of the West Africa College of Bishops and the Mediating Bishop.

Actions to Create Clarity, Understanding and Address Issues.

Goal: to build trust, create space for healing, and dispel rumors that create further harm and division.

Areas to be clarified and actions to be taken:

1. The Bishop and Cabinet will call and announce a Special Annual Conference Session by April 10 to present a report about the path forward to work toward healing and unity and elect new conference leadership and address any other issues needed to move this agreed actions forward.
2. At the June 1, 2024 Special Annual Conference Session, the Communication Committee will be nominated and elected for each annual conference. They, in consultation with the Bishop, will identify for each annual conference and the Episcopal Area the official communication channels so that clergy and laity will know the official communication vehicles to ensure communication is timely, creates understanding and dispels rumors. Further only official communication resources will be used to communicate about the path forward for the Nigeria Annual Conference. The Communications Committee will communicate the vehicles to be used by September 15, 2024.
3. A report will be written by the Path Forward Team about clergy or laity who were imprisoned, and the report will be released no later than the September 15, 2024.

¹ If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.

4. If there are individuals or groups promoting or working to exit The United Methodist Church of Nigeria or any of its congregations to join the Global Methodist Church, they are required to use the processes within The Book of Discipline². Individual clergy and lay members may leave on their own, and individuals that leave on their own will be respected as they exit The United Methodist Church. Further, any conference official or clergy person who is a member of another denomination or serving in a role or committee or board of another denomination including the Global Methodist Church, will be required by the Bishop and chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry to relinquish their role in the other denomination and provide evidence that they have relinquished their role or surrender their membership in The United Methodist Church. The District Superintendents will report to the Bishop by May 30, 2024 those clergy or laity in their District who are promoting and/or working to exit the Conference or congregations. The Bishop, Chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry and District Board of Laity will follow up with each person.
5. A request will be made to the President of the Council of Bishops by the group who developed this path forward to name a Bishop to attend Nigeria Annual Conference Sessions and continue to support the Bishop of Nigeria as needed and work with the Bishop and other leaders to carry out the agreements in this document. The request will be sent by Bishop Boni by April 5, 2024.

Measurement: Each item will be completed by the date specified and signed by the President of the College of Bishops.

Monitored by the mediation team to ensure timely completion and provide monthly reports to the President of the West Africa College of Bishops, the Bishop of Nigeria and the Conference Secretaries.

Actions to Create Healing and Unity within the Nigeria Annual Conference

Goal: Create space and processes to build trust, stop the harm, provide opportunity for healing to honor Jesus Christ, further the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church in Nigeria, and strengthen the witness of The United Methodist Church in communities, the Nation, the Central Conference and the denomination.

Actions:

1. A team of 20 lay and clergy leaders representing a diversity of perspectives about the challenges facing the United Methodists of Nigeria shall be appointed by the Bishop and a member of the West Africa College of Bishops. By April 30, 2024 fourteen (14) of the team members are to be appointed and the remaining six (6) shall be appointed following the election of new leaders at the June 1, 2024 Special Annual Conference Session to plan and organize the following actions.
 - a. A facilitated conversation with the Lead Mediating Bishop about the team's role, it's work and how to grow trust, see one another as sons and daughter of God, understand how others matter just like you matter, listen to learn, focus on a path forward without being paralyzed by the present challenges, and learn the steps to healing. Completed by August 15, 2024.

² For an Annual Conference to leave, it requires a vote by the Annual Conference, the Central Conference and General Conference (2016 Book of Discipline, paragraph 572)

- b. Write a set of guidelines for how Congregations and the Annual Conference will resolve conflict that will be used during all gatherings and when conflict arises. To be completed by September 2025.
- c. Write a vision of what the Nigeria United Methodist Church will become and other supporting descriptions that assist carrying out the vision. The statement will include:
 - i. A vision statement describing God’s hope and possibilities for the people of Nigeria through The United Methodist Church.
 - ii. What does it mean to honor Jesus Christ and how will this be incorporated into the life of each congregation and conference.
 - iii. What does it mean to advance the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church in Nigeria and how will this be incorporated into the life of each congregation and conference.
 - iv. How the guidelines for conflict resolution will be incorporated into the life of each congregation and conference.

Completed by November 15, 2024.

- d. Plan, organize and train leaders to hold listening and reconciliation sessions throughout the Conference. To begin January 2025 and Conclude by June 2025.
- e. Organize an Episcopal Area wide service of repentance and healing to spend intentional time for repentance and healing. At this gathering, the following will also be presented: 1) the learnings from the listening sessions, 2) a vision for The United Methodist Church of Nigeria, 3) guidelines for resolving conflict, and 4) the next steps to continue the healing. Completed by September 30, 2025.

Measurement: Each item will be completed by the due date and signed off by the President of the College of Bishops. Evidence will be given for renewed and strengthened relationships, demonstrated unity in gatherings, and leaders throughout the conference are practicing the guidelines for healing and resolving conflict.

Monitored by the mediation team to ensure timely completion and provide weekly reports to the President of the West Africa College of Bishops, the Bishop of Nigeria and the Conference Secretaries.

This Path Forward Covenant was prepared in a March 20-21, 2024 gathering to explore how to address recent conflicts and division in the Nigeria Annual Conference and captures the conversations of United Methodists throughout Nigeria. This Path Forward Covenant will be shared, and first steps will be reviewed and acted on at the Special Annual Conference Session that includes all four Nigeria Annual Conferences on June 1, 2024.

We invite you to pray for God to lead each of us forward, to pray for your conference leadership, to pray that God will unite one another and begin to heal any division.

Bishop John Wesley Yohanna
 Bishop Benjamin Boni, President of the West
 Africa College of Bishops
 Bishop Warner Brown
 Bishop John Schol

Rev. Bazel Yoila Yayuba
 Bishop Patrick Streiff
 Bishop David Yemba
 Rev. Ande Emmanuel
 Rev. Elis Yakku