

**DENOM-625: The United Methodist General Conference
April 23 – May 3, 2024, Charlotte, NC**

Instructors

Barry E. Bryant, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of United Methodist and Wesleyan Studies

barry.bryant@garrett.edu

Virginia A. Lee, Ed.D.

Associate Professor of Christian Education and Director of Deacon Studies

virginia.lee@garrett.edu

This partial syllabus is being posted for informational purposes and the book list. The final syllabus will be posted later and sent to students who have signed up to take the course. The final edition will include specific assignments along with dates, logistical information, and travel arrangements. Until then, students are encouraged to reserve the dates of General Conference, April 23-May 3, 2024. Due dates for assignments will also be determined at a later date.

Course Description

This course is being offered in conjunction with the 2024 United Methodist General Conference, April 23 – May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, NC. The purpose of the seminar is to critically and creatively analyze the events of General Conference in such a way that facilitates theological reflection that leads to a reimagined international United Methodist Church that is both post-colonial and inclusive of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Prerequisite

Because it is important to understand United Methodist polity, the function of General Conference to the denomination; the role of bishops, clergy, and laity, the power they wield and the parts they play in General Conference; the ways that the Central Conferences relate to Jurisdictional Conferences, students must have completed or be concurrently enrolled in DENOM 604 United Methodist Studies: 20th Century to the Present.

Course Thesis

General Conference (GC) is the legislative body of The United Methodist Church and its decisions create and constitute the polity of the denomination. As a result of the pandemic the 2020 GC was not convened, meaning that the last GC was in 2016. Since 2019 6,182 congregations have voted to disaffiliate and leave the UMC. While other issues will be discussed, the schism will dominate conversations. In any case, The UMC has not faced a crisis of this magnitude since the split over slavery in 1844. There are two challenges that continue to plague The United Methodist Church: how to contextualize theology within a connectional polity that is global in nature; and how to maintain a connection to the United Methodists in parts of Africa, Central Europe, and the Pacific regions, or the Central Conferences, without the relationship being neo-colonial in nature.

The course will analyze General Conference as a dramatic narrative that consists namely of a direct narration (what is being seen or heard), indirect narration (the activity and action seen on and off the floor of General Conference), and the contrapuntal narration (narrative that is neither

seen nor heard by either direct or indirect narration but is relevant to interpretation). As Edward Said has noted,

In practical terms, “contrapuntal reading” as I have called it means reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England...[T]he point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded. (Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66–67).

Contrapuntal reading asks the question, “What has been ‘forcibly excluded’ from the conversation?” The contrapuntal narrative is the subaltern narrative that has been silenced. As much as anything else the construct and control of the narrative is what creates the power struggles at General Conference. Migliore describes it as a struggle between the power of God and the gods of power. By applying narrative criticism, one can utilize rhetorical criticism in general and narrative criticism more specifically— an analytic tool also utilized by New Testament scholars. A continuation of narrative criticism and a contrapuntal reading of the drama will better enable a critical, creative, and nuanced theological reflection on General Conference.

Learning Outcomes

As a result of this seminar, students will be able to:

1. describe the major issues that are discussed and what is at stake in this particular General Conference;
2. apply the concept of “contrapuntal reading” to analyze General Conference;
3. use the tools of rhetorical and narrative criticism to interpret General Conference as the construction of a narrative;
4. reflect theologically on General Conference;
5. use journaling as an exercise in theological reflection of an event or context and as a resource for theological reflection; and,
6. describe their own social location as it relates to others attending General Conference; the ways in which they may be oppressed as well as an oppressor; and the ways in which they use power in leadership.

Required Texts and Resources

Numbers in parenthesis represent the suggested order of reading.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016. Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. The Kindle version is preferred. ASIN: B01NCNW6FM. \$12.99. It is also online for free.

The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016. United States: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. ASIN: B01N9JOOKE. \$11.99.

Crain, Margaret Ann. *Advancing the Mission: The Order of Deacon in The United Methodist Church*. Nashville: Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2021. ISBN-13: 978-1953052049. Paperback, \$24.99.(Amazon) (4)

- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc, 2018. \$54.84 paperback/\$36.70 Kindle. ISBN: 1478634898. Select chapters will also be posted on Moodle. (2)
- Migliore, Daniel L. *The Power of God and the Gods of Power*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. (1) ISBN: 0664231644. \$14.39 (Amazon).
- Scott, James C. *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*. Princeton University Press, 2012. (2) ProQuest Ebook Central,
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=1040747>
- Walton, Heather. *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, SCM Press: London, 2014. (3) \$34.38. ISBN: 0334051851.

The following is found on Moodle. Other material may be added.

- Bryant, Barry. "Cutting Edges: 'Upheavals of Thought' and Remembering General Conference," *Aware Magazine*, April (2019): 4-5.
- Chowdhry, Geeta. "Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading- Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations." *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 36, no. 1 (2007):101-16.
- Mortimer, Mildred P. "Edward Said and Assia Djebar- A Contrapuntal Reading." *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 3 (2005):53-67.
- What is "Contrapuntal Reading"? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXICbTki3s4>

United Methodist Resources on the Internet

- The United Methodist Church- www.umc.org
- The Council of Bishops- www.umc.org/who-we-are/council-of-bishops
- United Methodist General Boards, Agencies, and Commissions*
- General Board of Church and Society- www.umc-gbcs.org
- General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns- www.gccuic-umc.org
- General Commission on Religion and Race- www.gcorr.org
- General Council on Finance and Administration- www.gcfa.org
- General Board of Higher Education and Ministry- www.gbhem.org
- General Board of Discipleship- www.gbod.org
- General Commission on United Methodist Men- www.gcumm.org
- General Board of Global Ministries- www.umcmmission.org
- General Board of Pension and Health Benefits, now
 Wespeth Benefits and Investments- www.wespath.org
- General Commission on the Status and Role of Women- www.gcsrw.org
- General Commission on Archives and History- www.gcah.org
- United Methodist Communications- www.umcom.org
- General Board of Church and Society- www.umc-gbcs.org
- General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns- www.gccuic-umc.org
- United Methodist Young People- www.umcyoungpeople.org
- United Methodist Publishing House- www.umph.org

United Methodist Caucus Groups

UM Queer Clergy Caucus- www.umqcc.org

Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR)- <https://www.bmcrumc.org/>

National Hmong Caucus of the United Methodist Church- www.hmongumc.org

Metodistas Asociados Representando la Causa de los Hispano-Americanos (MARCHA)-
www.marchaumc.org

National Federation of Asian American United Methodists- www.nfaaum.org

Native American International Caucus- <http://www.naicumc.com/>

Pacific Islander National Caucus of United Methodists-
www.umcdevelopmentcenter.org/ministry-opportunities/pacific-islander-national-caucus-of-united-methodists

Supplemental Reading

Burkholder, Anne L., Thomas W. Elliott, and Thomas E. Frank. *Quick and easy guide to United Methodist polity*. Nashville, TN: Wesley's Foundery Books General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2018.

McLeary, Paul. *Structure, Governance and The United Methodist Church*. Xlibris Corporation, 2011.

Richey, Russell. *The Methodist Conference in America: A History*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996.

Richey, Russell, Thomas Frank. *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.