

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on Alaska as Mission District of the Pacific Northwest Conference

The following questions are among those we've been asked or have tried to anticipate regarding this potential change for the Alaska and Pacific Northwest Conferences of The United Methodist Church. If you have a question that is not included here already, please send it to communications@pnwumc.org for possible inclusion in a future version of this FAQ.

What did the Alaska Conference do at its Special Called Session?

At a Special Called Session on Saturday, February 22nd, the Alaska Conference overwhelmingly supported two petitions. The [first petition](#), asks the 2020 General Conference to discontinue its status as a Missionary Conference, allowing it to become a Mission District instead. The [second petition](#) asks that the Western Jurisdiction include Alaska as part of the Pacific Northwest (PNW) Annual Conference.

A news release about the work of the Special Called Session is available [here](#).

Why are they making this request?

The General Board of Global Ministries has indicated that Missionary Conferences like Alaska would no longer receive financial support in the coming quadrennium and that they intend to phase out the Missionary Conference designation in the United States altogether.

Also, Alaska's status as a Missionary Conference affords it less agency to determine its future under some scenarios of separation within The United Methodist Church.

Why can't Alaska be its own Conference?

The Book of Discipline requires that a regular (non-missionary) conference have at least 50 full clergy members. Even if all the clergy serving in Alaska from other conference transferred their membership to Alaska it would not meet this minimum number.

Why is Alaska asking to affiliate with the PNW specifically?

The Alaska Conference has a long-standing, healthy relationship with PNW and historical ties that predate its establishment as a Missionary Conference. It already shares services such as the Treasurer, Pension and Benefits Officer with PNW. Alaska already acts as a district, supporting candidates for ordained ministry, who they forward to PNW to examine, recommend and ordain. And Alaska is already a full participant with PNW and Oregon-Idaho in the Greater Northwest Area-wide cabinet and Innovation Vitality (IV) Team.

The alignment also makes most sense geographically and practically. There are currently 19 non-stop flights per day from Anchorage to Seattle. There are two from Anchorage to Portland. That number decreases if we consider other major cities in other Annual Conferences across the Western Jurisdiction.

How many churches are in Alaska? Where do their clergy come from?

The Conference Superintendent, Carlo Rapanut, likes to say that Alaska is one church with 29 doors. There are 29 local churches and fellowships in Alaska. Some are not accessible by road. As a Missionary Conference, Alaska does not have clergy membership, with the one exception of Charles Brower, an Alaskan Native, ordained within the Alaska Conference. Clergy serving these churches come from 11 Annual Conferences and 3 other denominations. Seven of the clergy serving in Alaska hold membership in the PNW Conference.

Are they all small, struggling churches?

Like the PNW, churches in Alaska vary in size and strength. If Alaska becomes a district in PNW, St. John UMC in Anchorage will be the second largest church in PNW, one member short of Bothell.

What does it mean to be a “mission district?”

¶ 415.4 of the 2016 Book of Discipline sets out four criteria to allocate a district mission district status, where only one of the following is needed to allow the designation:

- limited membership opportunities/resources
- a strategic demographic, cultural, or language opportunity
- a need for long-term sustaining funding from sources outside the district, including support for itinerant pastors
- a geographically remote geographic location from the other districts

Arguably, the state of Alaska might qualify for each.

The Discipline is less descriptive in defining the structure of a Mission District. Assuming the General and Western Jurisdictional Conferences act as requested, leaders in Alaska and the PNW will work together to determine a structure that is both fair and mission-focused.

What needs to happen before the Alaska Conference becomes a district of the PNW Conference?

First, the General Conference needs to receive and approve this request when it meets in May of this year.

Second, in July, the Western Jurisdictional Conference needs to redraw the boundaries of the Pacific Northwest Conference to include the new Alaska Mission District. While this will be in the hands of the delegates to ultimately approve, the WJ College of Bishops, Committee on Episcopacy, Mission Cabinet, and Leadership Team affirmed the plan when they met early in February.

Does the PNW have a decision to make?

Technically speaking, no. The status request that Alaska is making can only be acted upon by General Conference. Annual conference boundaries are decided by a jurisdiction in the U.S.

That said, the PNW Conference will have the opportunity to discuss and potentially affirm this course of action when it gathers this June in Puyallup. By this time, we'll know if the General Conference has approved this petition and will also have an informed understanding of the probable action of the Western Jurisdiction.

As we'll be joined by the Alaska and Oregon-Idaho Conferences for this Greater Northwest Shared Annual Conference Session, there will be opportunities to have discussions, to ask questions, and begin to consider what a shared future might look like together.

When would this be effective?

If the General Conference acts affirmatively on the Alaska Conference's petition in May and the Western Jurisdictional Conference in July acts to redraw the boundaries of the Conferences, Alaska could see a status change as early as July. That is only for the technical status change.

For the systemic changes to take place, there will be some natural shifts as Alaska already functions in some aspects like a district of PNW. Still, some changes may be phased in over a longer period to reduce shock and ease the transition. These could include changes to apportionments, pension benefits, representation in the PNW conference structures/committees. Preliminary conversations are already happening.

Will my local church apportionments go up?

People in both conferences ask this question.

We do not anticipate the impact of these expenses significantly disrupting the projected budget or apportioned amounts of either Alaska or PNW for 2021.

The Treasurer's best preliminary estimate is that the cost for Alaska to operate as a district will be about the same as in its current configuration. Some costs, like the moving expenses of pastors moving to/from the lower 48, have been subsidized by GBGM in the past, and will need to find new funding sources. PNW has already reduced meeting costs by conducting more meetings via video conferencing. United Methodists in Alaska are already quite familiar with video-conferencing due to the travel challenges present in the state.

How will this impact the ways our boards and agencies work?

If the proposals are adopted, PNW would include a new Alaska Mission District. Just as district voice and representation is important now, within PNW, intentional inclusion of Alaskans in decision making, fellowship and governance will be a priority in the future. We anticipate continuing and expanding the use of cost-saving video conferenced meetings, familiar to both conferences.

At the same time, the distance of Alaska, and the flexibility of being a Mission District, may allow Alaska to continue to function somewhat more independently than the districts in Washington and Idaho.

With the addition of this new district, the PNW will be the largest in the U.S. connection geographically-speaking. Outfitting a few strategic locations in Alaska with high-speed internet and video-conference room equipment could allow members there to participate with less investment of time and treasure for many meetings — just as it does already for members further away from set meeting locations.

Will Alaskans be traveling to the Washington/Idaho for Annual Conference? Isn't that more expensive?

Bishop Stanovsky has already started the conversation about alternate ways to “gather” for the annual conference — ideas that might not require every member to be physically present, or at least not every year. For example, it may be possible that the Alaska Mission District continues to gather every year for a district session, with a select number of delegates going to the PNW each year on behalf of the whole. Or, what would it look like if each district gathered as regional bodies and then at the end, held a Zoom gathering of the Annual Conference with these regional events as remote sites? Additionally, United Methodist siblings in the Pacific Islands, who are part of the California Pacific Annual Conference, already deal with this challenge. There may be something to learn from their experiences.

Will Alaska function like the other five districts of the PNW?

If approved, Alaska will become the first Mission District in The United Methodist Church. *The Book of Discipline* allows for some flexibility to organize in a way that serves the needs of the mission field, as well as the whole Conference. In the days before the Special Called Session, members of the Alaska Conference engaged in productive, missional conversations about the structure they might need. Assuming the General and Western Jurisdictional Conferences act as anticipated, leaders in the new district will continue these conversations with others in the PNW to define a structure and relationship that is fair and designed to maximize our witness in Alaska and across the PNW.

We do expect that Alaska will continue to relate to PNW in the ways it already does (BOM, Treasury, Pension and Benefits, Office of Innovation and Vitality, etc.) while adding new facets that make missional sense. It would continue to have a superintendent on the cabinet, working closely with the bishop and other superintendents in the PNW and Oregon-Idaho Conferences to provide pastoral and administrative leadership.

United Methodists in Alaska have strong leadership and have organized themselves well to support their shared work. These are things they expect to bring with them as they join the PNW Conference and may serve as a model for organization in other districts across the Conference.

Will elders in the PNW Conference be appointed to local churches in the Alaska Conference?

As always, the cabinet strives to make appointments that serve the needs of both the churches and the clergy and families. Cross-conference appointments in the Greater Northwest Area have increased in frequency over the past two quadrennia with several PNW elders serving in Alaska already. Such appointments would no longer be cross-conference for elder members of the PNW.

United Methodism in Alaska has long benefitted from the recruitment of clergy from across the denomination who were called to serve there. This is not something they want to relinquish and will be exploring how they might continue to recruit clergy as a mission district. Additionally, the costs of moving clergy to and from Alaska for service are not insignificant, amplifying the need to appoint individuals who are a good match.