

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Alaska Becoming a Mission District

In the 2019 season of Charge Conferences, conversations were held about the possibility of the Alaska Conference giving up its Missionary Conference status and become , instead, a Mission District of the Pacific Northwest (PNW) Annual Conference. The following are answers to the most common questions asked:

- 1. Will there be a loss of the “appeal” that comes with being a Missionary Conference and, hence, also the support that comes with that appeal?** We are still the expression of United Methodism in Alaska. The draw/appeal that comes from us is because of who we are and what we do, not our title. It will be incumbent upon us to continue sharing our story of how exciting mission and ministry is in Alaska and inviting those from the outside to be partners with us. The Mission District can be used outside to leverage support, with the mission field of Alaska highlighted (e.g. Girdwood as only church in that community or Willow’s invaluable service to those who are food insecure in their area). The Last Frontier will still be the last frontier, just as the Alaska Flag Song says.

- 2. What if AK drops off the radar of lower 48 ACs for mission partnerships?** This is where we still have to do the work of cultivating and nurturing relationships outside and telling our story well. Perhaps the conversation of itinerating needs to come back in the forefront of the work that we do. How are we being intentional about raising support and excitement about the ministry in Alaska? This is in our own hands more than anywhere else. In this regard we are in charge of our own fate.

- 3. Won’t Alaska’s contextual issues be lost in the larger AC structure?** The structure of a Mission District according to Discipline allows us the flexibility to create some of our own rules/exempt us from other things that conferences may require. We can be negotiators at the table as these things arise. Additionally, ¶659 of the 2016 Book of Discipline provides for the incorporation and organization of a district. We can design and operate under our own structure.

- 4. What will happen to clergy who are called to lifetime ministry in AK and not necessarily called to serve in PNW?** They can still do that, though nothing in either an appointive system is guaranteed. Right now, because we don’t know what General Conference will do, we don’t know what system the Church we’re part of going forward will do for clergy deployment. But, either way, talented and gifted people called into full time church service will be in demand and can continue to serve out that call in Alaska. God is not done with ministry in the Last Frontier. In determining how we are structured as a mission district, we will create new or utilize existing avenues for clergy to serve in extension ministries or to serve on loan from another conference.

- 5. We value our time with the Bishop. Won't that time diminish with this shift?** We will need to be intentional about invitation – creating spaces for the Bishop to be present (whether that's regional AC's every other year, with an invite to Winter Rendezvous in the off years, etc.). The truth is, we can exert exactly the same influence over how much time we get with the bishop in the new structure as we currently do, which is very little. The bishop controls the bishop's time and schedule.
- 6. Will our apportionments go up or down?** The Treasurer's best preliminary estimate was that the cost to operate as a district, including apportionments, will be about the same as in the current configuration, but more detail work needs to be done on this. Part of the negotiations with PNW need to be a phase-in period for changes such as apportionments.
- 7. Will we be going to Washington for Annual Conference? Isn't that more expensive?** There's the potential for real change here that can catalyze us into action and agency that we haven't experienced before. Our current bishop has already started the conversation about alternate ways to "gather" for the annual conference—ways that might not require every member to be physically present, or at least. To every year. For example, what would it look like to host an AC in Alaska every year, with a select number of delegates going to PNW on each time on behalf of the whole? Or, what would it look like for districts to gather as regional bodies and then at the end, have a Zoom gathering of the Annual Conference through these regional events as remote sites. We are also exploring ways other than having the sending local churches or the members themselves pay for travel. But it's important also to remember that our sisters and brothers in the Pacific Islands who are part of the California Pacific Annual Conference already deal with this problem and we can learn from their model.
- 8. How will this affect clergy pensions? Will pension payments go up or down? Will we still get the Defined Benefit exemption for Missionary Conferences (\$5,700)?** We may have to pay the Defined Benefit portion, unless we can negotiate a change that also exempts Mission Districts. But that portion is also likely to decrease under the new clergy retirement plan, with the projection that it will eventually get to zero. This is also not the first time Wespath is dealing with such a shift and they have a model of phasing-in the shifts over a quadrennium so that it does not come as a shock to the churches. Further, the pension program, and all its various parts, are denominationally determined, with very limited local discretion.
- 9. Why PNW? Can we choose to affiliate with another AC other than PNW or OI?** We already have a long standing, healthy relationship with PNW. In many ways, we already essentially function as a district of PNW with shared services such as the Treasurer, Pension and Benefits Officer, Innovation and Vitality Team, our Professional Ministries Unit acting as District Committee on ordained ministry to the PNW Board of

Ordained Ministry, our ministry candidates going through the process of commissioning and ordination through PNW. It also makes most sense geographically and practically. There are currently 19 non-stop flights per day from Anchorage to Seattle. There are 2 from Anchorage to Portland. That number decreases if we consider other major cities in other Annual Conferences.

10. Will we still get the 50% discount for CE Curriculum from Cokesbury? This could be one of the negotiations we engage in where the benefit continues for us as a Mission District. We can also devise a system of curriculum sharing, some of which is already being done, where different CE curriculums are shared across local churches. This may help mitigate costs in case we lose the discount. Being part of PNW also allows us to draw on the resources of churches, particularly larger ones, for support and resource sharing.

11. Will our properties be owned by the PNW? No. Local churches will continue to own their own property, most likely in trust for whatever denomination with which we are associated, though the trust clause is one of the matters in flux and at play for General Conference 2020 and for whatever is to follow.

12. How will the structure look like? That is the next step in the process, that is, to negotiate how we relate with PNW. These conversations are already happening. But essentially, we would function as a district of the PNW, continuing to relate to PNW in the avenues that we do now (BOM, Treasury, Pension and Benefits, Office of Innovation and Vitality, etc.) but adding new facets that we do not currently have. The DS would still be on the same Cabinet that he/she would be when we were an AC. Practically, our identity as Alaska would likely stay the same. Geography does a good deal to help us here.

13. How soon will changes take effect? Assuming our Special Session in February votes to approve the petition, the General Conference in May acts on the petition affirmatively and the Western Jurisdictional Conference in July acts to redraw the boundaries of the Conferences, we 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 easy shifts because we are in some aspects already functioning as a district of PNW but there are also shifts that may be based in over a certain period to reduce shock and ease the transition. These could include apportionments, pension benefits, representation in PNW conference structures/committees and these conversations are already happening.