

***Please note that any summaries of the gathering do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of the individual attendees and/or any associated organization.***

**Paragraph 717 Gathering Summary  
September 11-12, 2025  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary  
Evanston, Illinois**

At General Conference 2024, a petition amending Paragraph 717 in *The Book of Discipline* was referred to the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) for further review and consideration. Following General Conference, the GCFA Board referred the petition to Wespath.

Wespath developed a thorough process to consider updating Paragraph 717. As an initial step, Wespath organized a two-day gathering in September 2025 dedicated to discussion around Paragraph 717. Decisions about proposed amendments to Paragraph 717 were not made at the September gathering. More information about Paragraph 717 and Wespath's process can be found on [Wespath's website](#).

The gathering was facilitated by Kate Ott, the Jerre and Mary Joy Stead Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Garrett) in Evanston, Illinois. More information about Dr. Ott can be found on the [Garrett website](#) and her [personal website](#).

**September 11, 2025**

**Grounding Ritual**

Members of the Garrett student chapel team helped Dr. Ott and Wespath staff member Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón with the opening worship service. The theme was building from Paul's statement of "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:1-11). The focus was a distinction between our contributions, others' contributions and God's contributions to conversations about what it means to align investments with the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church (UMC).

**Welcome**

Garrett President Rev. Dr. Javier Viera welcomed attendees to the seminary and said Garrett was honored to serve as host. He encouraged attendees to model what the world lacks and wrestle with differences without diminishing each other. He said that if the

Church is to have influence, it won't be because we get it perfect or right, but because we make a space for wrestling with differences.

Wespath General Secretary and CEO Andy Hendren then spoke and said Wespath's goal in hosting the event is to facilitate genuine, candid conversation. He reminded attendees that Paragraph 717 in the *Discipline* didn't receive due consideration on the plenary floor of General Conference 2020/24. Following this, Wespath staff and Board members wanted to take a different approach ahead of General Conference 2028. Wespath hopes this gathering is a space for more robust discussions than the format on the floor of General Conference allows. He stated that he hopes this convening will lead to something new, collaborative and creative.

### **Sacred Circles**

Dr. Ott explained the Sacred Circles exercise. She stated the intent of the sacred circles is for attendees to build bridges and listen to one another. The hope, she said, is to build bonds that strengthen our shared community.

The first sacred circle question that everyone in attendance answered: "Please share a word of greeting, your name, where you are from, and one word to describe how you are feeling right now."

The second sacred circle question that attendees participating in the discussions answered: "What led you to say yes to coming to this conversation? How does this reflect your personal faith and/or commitment to the UMC? What do you hope to contribute to and receive from the conversation?"

### **Ground Rules**

Dr. Ott explained the six ground rules for the gathering:

1. Steward time. Be on time. Stay present. Stay on topic.
2. Respect others and the process. Be open to other's experiences and expertise. Recognize intent and acknowledge impact. If an attendee's feelings are hurt, they are encouraged to say, "Ouch."
3. Take risks.
4. What's said here stays here; what's learned here leaves here.
5. Create an inclusive environment.
6. We come as faithful members of the UMC. You are here as a person, not an organization. We work for the whole of a diverse denomination that values connectionalism.

## **Vision for the Time Together**

Mr. Hendren spoke and acknowledged some attendees feel long legacies of hurt based on Wespath's past actions. He said Wespath has new leadership that is open to feedback. He also quoted the preamble to the Social Principles: "Differences are a precious gift and daunting challenge."

He said his hope is that attendees spend this time together in holy conversation and identify what barriers might be evident between and among us. Also, he hoped attendees could identify some commonalities that they could then take to stakeholders for feedback.

Deaconess Irene DeMaris, a member of the Wespath Board of Directors, then shared her background. Deaconess DeMaris, who is the executive director of Iowa Faith & Climate Network, submitted her name to be considered as a Board member in response to comments from Wespath she found frustrating at General Conference 2020/24. Upon joining the Board, she was appointed to the UMC Principles Committee and her experience on the Board made her feel her voice was not only heard but welcomed. She recounted seeing how Wespath's sovereign debt human rights framework was developed and called the process "pretty incredible." Playing off an old jingle for Sears, Deaconess DeMaris encouraged attendees to, "Come see the softer side of Wespath." She said attendees can be their whole selves during the time together.

## **The Journey of Shared Work**

Dr. Ott asked attendees to think about the things that metaphorically act as bridges, roadblocks and trails related to the conversations surrounding the work of aligning investments with UMC Social Principles, including how it relates to Paragraph 717. Bridges bring people together across differences. Roadblocks stand in the way of next steps being taken. Trails are something new that can be walked together.

Attendees began the exercise by working individually to write down the things they identified as bridges, roadblocks and trails. Then, attendees gathered in small groups to share and write down their thoughts.

## **The Journey of Shared Work Discussion**

Following the exercise, attendees were invited to discuss their insights. During this time, Coté Soerens, an external contributor specializing in visual facilitation, performed visual notetaking of the discussion.

You can find pictures of Ms. Soerens' graphic recording [here](#) and [here](#).

## **Presentation on Paragraph 717 and Different Sustainable Investment Approaches.**

Jake Barnett, Wespath's Managing Director of Sustainable Investment Strategies, explained he oversees socially responsible investment at Wespath. He credited Dr. Ashley Boggan, General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History, for researching John Wesley's views on the use of money and the history of sustainable investment in the *Discipline*. You can find details on her research [here](#). Mr. Barnett then shared highlights of that research. Dr. Boggan's research suggests that Wesley was a pioneer—if not a founder—of socially responsible investing. Dr. Boggan's research also noted a major change in the *Discipline* relating to sustainable investment occurred in 1988 as a result of South African apartheid pressure.

Mr. Barnett transitioned to discuss UMC directives for church investments. While *The Book of Resolutions* (*Resolutions*) is more advisory in nature, Wespath also recognizes the importance of resolutions. He pointed to Resolution 3226 as an example. The Resolution was passed at General Conference 2020/2024 and called on Wespath to exclude investments in bonds of three governments engaged in prolonged military occupation. Wespath spent more than a year in discernment to develop a human rights exclusion framework that was global, consistent and holistic. The framework uses reputable data sources to identify governments with patterns of human rights violations. Finally, he discussed the pros and cons of different methods of sustainable investment: environmental, social and governance (ESG) integration; active impact or solutions investing; engagement or active stewardship; and exclusion or divestment. Mr. Barnett explained he used ChatGPT in an aim to compile an unbiased list of pros and cons. He also acknowledged many of the shortcomings of using ChatGPT despite good intentions of seeking to utilize it to remove biases.

## **Day 1 wrap-up**

Dr. Ott encouraged attendees to share final reflections. As the day came to a close, one participant invited attendees to pray before tomorrow's discussion and a second participant encouraged attendees to read the story of Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar.

**September 12, 2025**

## **Introduction to Small Group Exercises**

Mr. Barnett encouraged attendees to have a “yes, and” approach in the small group exercises, borrowing from a well-known improv comedy rule. For example, he said, if someone in your group is in favor of fossil fuel divestment, and you are not, don't just say no because that may shut down the discussion. Instead, a more positive response may be,

*Yes, I can understand why you favor divestment, and from my perspective, I have some concerns.* He encouraged groups to find paths that weren't immediately evident when we first gathered. Attendees were encouraged not to limit ideas solely around Paragraph 717 in the *Discipline*.

The small group exercise had three rounds.

In Round 1, attendees were broken into small groups and given roughly 30 minutes to brainstorm ideas for a revised approach to socially responsible investing in the UMC. The goal was to generate a wide variety of ideas and possibilities. Some groups drafted new ideas of what language applicable to the *Discipline* and the *Resolutions* could look like. Other groups jotted down fresh ideas for how to approach these conversations in the future. And others keyed on values and principles. The only rule was you had to create something to present to everyone in attendance.

In Round 2, each small group's work was posted in the room, and all attendees were invited to individually walk around, read the group ideas and respond—with agreement, questions, or concerns—through Post-it note comments.

In Round 3, attendees were placed in new small groups. Each Round 3 small group was assigned a Round 1 small group output and asked to refine and revise it, keeping in mind the “yes and” guidance. This refinement was based on both their own perspectives and the individual feedback received in Round 2 through the Post-it notes.

### **Presentations of Small Group Exercises**

A representative from each Round 3 group then presented to all attendees. A few repeated themes emerged.

#### Repeated Themes:

- Ground the work deeply in the Social Principles.
- Use this work as part of a discipleship effort. Create resources or curriculum for United Methodist laypeople.
- This is an opportunity for education about the Social Principles and investing in ways that align with your faith.
- A desire for an inclusive and transparent process, that includes the perspectives of United Methodists from around the world and those impacted by harms.

#### Areas without consensus:

- How prescriptive to be. Some attendees were in favor of listing inclusions and specific exclusions. Others wanted to simplify the language of Paragraph 717 and

instead provide guidelines about the process used to invest and leave space for trust and creativity.

- The approach to fossil fuels and carbon emissions more broadly.

## **End of Day 2 Reflections**

Following group presentations, Dr. Ott asked the following two prompts:

- “I ask that we keep thinking about \_\_\_\_\_.”
- “The commonalities I heard and want to emphasize are \_\_\_\_\_.”

Some responses to the first question included:

- Relationship building and group opportunities
- Stakeholders, in addition to shareholder
- The people that are being affected by climate change
- Humility
- Discipleship
- Who is the most marginalized? Are they being centered?
- We’ve all shown up here in good faith, but we all have different ideas of how we live out our values. If we go too broad, we may lose our connection to each other.
- It’s easy to fall into U.S.-centrism. There are others outside of the U.S. (or within native populations) that can create investment resources, and their perspectives are important.

## **Closing Ritual**

Dr. Ott and Garrett students led a closing ritual that returned to the 1 Corinthians theme discussed in the initial grounding ritual.