
**The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation Agreement:
"It's Not a Done Deal"
by Bishop Peggy A. Johnson
Eastern Pennsylvania and Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conferences
January 4, 2020**

The people called United Methodists have been on a long journey of conversation and debate regarding human sexuality: specifically the marriage and ordination of homosexual people and what "the practice of homosexuality being contrary to Christian teaching" means. The Protocol Statement that was released on January 3, 2020 seems to be a significant break-through in this 47 year impasse. It was crafted by a diverse group of 16 key United Methodist leaders along with a professional mediator. My deepest appreciation goes to them for this faithful and courageous work.

This was initiated by Bishop John Yambasu, from the Sierra Leone Annual Conference in July 2019. He yearned for the United Methodist Church to remain a denomination in the midst of much talk of schism and the many unhappy conversations after the 2019 General Conference that included blame and shame.

This group of 16 continued to meet throughout the fall and the Protocol statement that was just issued will go to General Conference. It must also be considered by Judicial Council (constitutional legality), the General Commission on Finance and Administration (financial impacts) and the Commission on General Conference (logistics and scheduling).

It is important to note that this must be approved by the delegates of General Conference (May 5-15, 2020 in Minneapolis, MN) for this to become a reality. This Protocol still needs to be written into legislation form and presented to the delegates. So it is not a done deal! My email inbox was flooded yesterday by numerous concerned pastors and laity and I was interviewed by three newspapers. The major concern was the same: The UMC has split!! Not so! Please tell people this is not a done deal!

This Protocol is significant, ground breaking, and has the potential to accomplish much good. Among the components of this protocol are:

- The moratorium on all complaints and trials with regard to homosexuality between now and the General Conference.
- It keeps the Global UMC intact. The plan is to have the UMC be organized in regions that will determine their way of living with regard to paragraphs regarding homosexuality.
- It allows the Traditional churches to leave with their assets and be able to create their own denomination. A sum of \$25 million dollars will be paid over the next 4 years toward this end. As a result, there will be no court battles over property matters.

- It sets aside \$39 million dollars from both the UMC and the Traditionalist denomination for reparations in acknowledgement of the harm done to people of color during past changes in structure and system. These funds are to support programs, training and agency work to ensure the health and vitality of our ethnic constituencies going forward.
- It also sets aside \$2 million dollars for any future denomination that might want to also be developed.
- It ensures that clergy will still keep their pensions as everyone will continue to have Wespath Pension services.
- It allows for Disaffiliation for churches that wish to go on their own. However they must follow the Disciplinary paragraphs regarding this process.

All of this takes a very long time and with the Protocols are time-lines and benchmarks that will spin out for at least the next four years. So it is not a done deal even at the close of General Conference. (There will likely be amendments and changes to the plan if it does pass so it will not look exactly like the statement we have before us.)

What do we do in the meantime?

- Dispel any rumors that we have already "split" as a denomination.
- Continue to follow the news articles about the developments with the Protocols (umc.org).
- Attend the General Conference delegate listening sessions that will be happening this spring.
- Continue with the ministry and mission of the church. Make disciples! Be the presence of Christ's love in this world.
- Most importantly PRAY. Pray for the United Methodist Church and its witness to the world. It is my hope that moving forward what we decide at General Conference will ultimately multiply our witness and we will be poised to reach more and more people for Jesus Christ.

I do offer a personal lament at this time. Being who I am, with the image of the "Body of Christ" as a central part of my theology and heart, it is important for me to offer my thought that with a divided body we will be less whole. A denomination or any church that separates over their understanding of God's truth has left itself without the possibility of more understanding and growth. We can only mature spiritually and personally by the refining fire of discourse and collective prayer with those with whom we disagree. When we go to our respective "corners" I believe we will soon discover that we are "less than" we could be without the other.

However, having struggled together for 47 years, it is likely a season for this Protocol to be enacted for many practical and important reasons. Our witness has taken a serious hit as people from the outside see us as a warring body and much ministry time has been spent engaging in disagreeable conversations. May there come a day when we get back together, we people called Methodists. Just as the Apostle Paul apparently reconciled with John Mark (II Timothy 4:11) after separating from Barnabas over a

dispute that had something to do with Mark's desertion (Acts 15:37), I am hopeful that we too can find our way back together in the future.

Bishop Peggy A. Johnson
Philadelphia Area