

Embracing a New Beginning

By Keith Boyette – The Wesleyan Covenant Association – <https://wesleyancovenant.org/>

February 14, 2020 – wesleyancovenant.org/2020/02/14/embracing-a-new-beginning/

With the recent announcement of the [Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#), and now the release of its [implementing legislation](#), many United Methodists are focusing on next steps. The protocol has now been endorsed by seven major advocacy groups that have often been at odds with one another: The Confessing Movement, Good News, Mainstream UMC, Reconciling Ministries Network, UMCNext, Uniting Methodists, and the Wesleyan Covenant Association. Many believe their joint endorsement of the agreement increases the likelihood that its implementing legislation will be adopted.

From its inception in 2016, the Wesleyan Covenant Association has tried to prepare for every likely contingency facing traditionalist United Methodists. Recognizing the irreconcilable differences in the church, the unwillingness of some clergy to abide by our *Book of Discipline*, and either the inability or to unwillingness of leaders to maintain good order, the WCA believed it was quite possible the church was headed for an amicable or a contentious separation.

In light of these possibilities, shortly before the 2019 special General Conference the WCA began to prepare for the formation of a new church *if* the UM denomination abandoned its long-held teachings on marriage, its ordination standards, and its sexual ethics. Launching a new denomination was not the association's desire, but it was determined it would not be caught unprepared should it become necessary.

To that end, in late 2018 the WCA Global Council tasked a 16-member working group with preparing a [draft "Book of Doctrines and Discipline"](#). Since then, the council has methodically been reviewing and editing the group's work, and in November 2019 it released a substantial portion of it for wider review and comment. The WCA intends to offer the document as a thoughtfully prepared and carefully vetted proposal for those traditionalists that would attend a convening conference for a new church. The WCA fully recognizes ultimate decisions regarding the shape of such a church would be made by a wide circle of traditionalists, and it also believes it is wise to make a working document available to that body as a foundational resource.

Today, on the other side of all the developments of the past year, the WCA believes the UM Church will experience either a "soft" separation (such as the protocol agreement makes possible) or a "hard" division following the 2020 General Conference. And in fact, with the UM Church's General Commission on Finance and Administration, it painfully recognizes a form of separation is already underway as approximately 100,000 fewer persons in the U.S. worship in local UM churches each year.

In order to prepare for whatever separation does come to pass, the WCA's 228-member Global Legislative Assembly recently established six ministry task forces to focus on key ministry areas in a new Methodist church: accountable discipleship, church multiplication, church revitalization, global mission partnerships, ministry to and with marginalized peoples, and ministry to and with youth and young adults. These task forces are beginning their work and will make recommendations for effective ministry to the WCA Council, and ultimately to a convening conference for the creation of a new traditionalist Methodist church.

Now that separation appears likely, the WCA's efforts are directed toward helping launch a new church committed to the teachings and ethics of the historic Christian faith in the Wesleyan tradition. It is also mindful that other traditionalist clergy and laity are now considering their options in the event of a relatively amicable division of the denomination. As they navigate their way forward, they understandably have many questions and concerns, and yet they are also hopeful and excited about creating a new Wesleyan expression of the Christian faith. The WCA is eager to partner with all traditionalists to prepare for the future. And to that end, WCA staff and council members are scheduled to meet with wider circles of traditionalists in the coming weeks to pray and think together about what might be next.

At the same time, WCA members across the connection want to maintain the momentum the association has engendered over the past few years. Therefore, if the 2020 General Conference adopts the protocol agreement's implementing legislation, the WCA plans to immediately announce the formation of a new traditionalist Methodist church. It will do so for the sake of hundreds and perhaps thousands of traditionalist local churches that feel trapped in annual conferences that are solidly centrist or progressive. With justification, these churches will want to part ways from the post-separation UM Church sooner than later, and according to the terms of the protocol agreement they will have the freedom to join a new traditionalist Methodist church.

It is our hope that traditionalist clergy and laity will work together to provide transitional leadership for this church, and furnish it with a provisional polity while all traditionalists prepare for a convening conference as soon as logistically possible, perhaps in late 2020 or early 2021. In any event, the WCA believes the door should remain wide open as many more local churches and annual conferences join in this endeavor. Launching a new traditionalist Methodist church is a hopeful and exciting step, but most people recognize it will be a work in progress, necessitating numerous refinements in its early years as it grows and flourishes.

WCA members and friends are committed to the great truths of our faith and passionate about making disciples of Jesus Christ. We long for a church that invests its time and resources in young people who have a heart for ministry in challenging places. We want a diverse church that is truly reflective of all God's people. And we have a deep desire for a church that continues to foster the warm and effective global partnerships we have fostered over many years. Out of conflict and struggle, we believe God is giving us an opportunity to be part of a new thing He is doing. And so, we are excited to embrace this new opportunity, and eager to join with all traditionalists as we discern together what God has in store for us.

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