

Why a Mediated Negotiation?

By Keith Boyette – January 7, 2020

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This year, The United Methodist Church is 52 years old. Of course, the Methodist movement, currently composed of approximately 80 distinct Methodist denominations worldwide, is much older than that. The UM Church was formed from the union of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968. Methodism, as with all parts of the Christian family, has experienced its share of divisions and reunions over its more than 225-year existence as a global movement.

For 48 of its 52 years, the UM Church has known ever-increasing levels of conflict regarding the authority and interpretation of the Bible, and the church's doctrines and ethics. The presenting debate has focused on our sexual ethics, our definition of marriage, and our ordination standards. That debate has become more heated and polarizing with each passing year.

The thought of amicable separation was first discussed at a General Conference, the quadrennial legislative gathering for the UM Church, in 2004 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the 2012 and 2016 General Conferences, leaders of various constituencies in the church met to discuss whether it was time to separate. Each time, we opted for legislative conflict over dealing directly with our irreconcilable differences. In 2016, a diverse group of leaders asked the Council of Bishops to lead the UM Church toward separation. Instead, the Council of Bishops recommended the creation of a Commission on the Way Forward with a charge to find a way to maintain institutional unity despite deep and growing conflict. The General Conference ultimately authorized the Council of Bishops to create their proposed commission.

The Commission on the Way Forward presented three plans to a special General Conference in 2019. The Connectional Conference Plan, which received virtually no support, would have created three theologically distinct conferences within the UM Church, each having a different teaching on the issues involved in the impasse. The One Church Plan would have empowered annual conferences and local churches to make their own decisions on the definition of marriage and ordination. And the Traditional Plan would have the UM Church reaffirm its historic position on ordination and marriage, and enhance accountability.

The 2019 special General Conference narrowly adopted the Traditional Plan by a vote of 53 percent. In the weeks that followed, resistance and disobedience to the order and discipline of the UM Church multiplied. Leaders in many of our annual conferences in the United States issued statements decrying the passage of the Traditional Plan and some plainly stated they would not enforce it. We are now a church bitterly divided and so this year we

are set up for another contentious and harmful General Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota unless we can write a different narrative.

As the debate in the UM Church progressed, three constituencies emerged along a continuum – (1) traditionalists who have a high view of Scripture, its authority and interpretation, and who uphold the church’s historic definition of marriage and ordination standards, (2) centrists, who also claim to have a high view of Scripture, but believe competing teachings on these matters can co-exist in one church, and (3) progressives who, as a matter of justice, believe the church must liberalize its sexual ethics, its teachings on marriage, and its ordination standards.

Two significant responses resulted from the 2019 special General Conference. First, the distance between the progressive and centrist positions nearly disappeared. Many centrists have now adopted the position of the progressives. Second, prior to 2019, traditionalists were arrayed along a continuum between traditionalists who were leaning into the UM Church (those who wanted to continue to work for upholding historic Christian teachings and practices within the UM Church) and traditionalists who were leaning out of the denomination (those who saw the toxic nature of the battle, the increasing inability of church leaders to maintain good order and discipline, and all the harm it was doing to local congregations and the denomination). After the 2019 special General Conference and the ensuing resistance and disobedience, more traditionalists moved to the leaning out part of this continuum. These two responses – the coalescing of centrists and progressives and more traditionalists now leaning out of the denomination – simply reemphasized the deep fissure within the church.

The mediated negotiations began in this environment. Bishop John Yambasu from the Sierra Leone Episcopal Area in Africa and Bishop Christian Alsted from the Nordic-Baltic Episcopal in Europe invited traditionalist (myself included), centrist, and progressive leaders to participate in a conversation aimed at resolving our church’s decades long dispute. Traditionalist leaders participated because of our desire to end the conflict and create a healthier and more hopeful future for traditional laity, clergy, and churches.

For the first time, the mediated negotiation brought together leaders of every major advocacy group associated with the constituencies involved in the conflict plus bishops (eventually including Bishop Ken Carter of the Florida Episcopal Area and president of the Council of Bishops and Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey of the Louisiana Episcopal Area and the council’s president-elect). International leaders (three additional bishops and one clergyperson) also joined as the negotiations continued. And very importantly, Kenneth Feinberg, the internationally renowned attorney, offered his services to facilitate the negotiations. Eventually, after several sessions, a group of 16 participants arrived at a comprehensive agreement called the “[Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation](#),” a proposal we all hope will end the conflict in the UM Church. A [FAQ](#) was also prepared by the group.

Some have justifiably asked, “Why are the traditionalists the ones tasked with creating a new Methodist church, while progressives and centrists continue as the post-separation United Methodist Church?” The answer is simply, “Progressives and centrists are not willing to leave the UM Church.” They will not do so voluntarily and the process of forcing them to leave would require numerous church trials that would distract from the church’s mission, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, ruin the church’s reputation, and all with no assurance of producing the intended outcome. Progressives and centrists are prepared to remain in the UM Church even if the conflict escalates. Traditionalists could of course dig in their heels and say, “We are not leaving either,” but to what end? It would simply perpetuate a fight that now threatens the health and vitality of local churches and the denomination’s very existence. Thus, if we traditionalists truly want this conflict to end, then we are the ones who have to separate.

The protocol agreement announced on Friday, January 3, is not a perfect document. Nothing in the document has exactly the terms I would have chosen if I had been the sole author. And of course, the document is not exactly what the progressives and centrists wanted either. The entire document reflects significant compromises made by all parties to reach an agreement which each of the signatories have committed to support despite painful compromises. For the first time in this long, torturous journey, all of the constituencies have agreed to the terms of a separation. We can argue over a specific provision here or there, and to be sure we did argue about many things. In fact, we argued for nine, long contentious days. People can of course critique the results, but they cannot deny that for the first time a plan has been proposed and endorsed by centrists, progressives, and traditionalists — with the support of prominent episcopal leaders from Africa, Eurasia, the Philippines, and the U.S – that would end our long and now destructive conflict.

The most important part of the protocol — by far in my estimation – is that every local church that decides to join a new Methodist denomination could do so with the full ownership of their buildings, real estate, and assets free of the UM Church’s trust clause. If you do not understand the value of that provision, then I encourage you to talk to traditionalists who were formerly part of The Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the Presbyterian Church USA. They will explain to you the trauma of spending tens of thousands of dollars litigating for their property and assets only to lose them in the end.

I will have more to write about the “[Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation](#),” but for now, each and everyone has a choice to make. We can choose further conflict and uncertainty, or we can support a plan that frees us to be the church God desires. For now, I appreciate your prayers, the many messages of encouragement, and even the messages that have challenged the protocol and my efforts on your behalf. I am praying for all of us as we move toward General Conference 2020.

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