

Protocol on Track

By Rob Renfroe – Good News Magazine - January 11, 2021

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As we begin a new year, I know many United Methodists are wondering, “Where do things stand regarding the protocol for separating the church? Is it still on track? Why haven’t we heard much about it lately?”

The Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation was created by a sixteen-member panel of leading traditionalists, centrists, and progressives, including several bishops. Advocacy groups spanning the theological spectrum, including Good News, the Confessing Movement, the Wesleyan Covenant Association, Reconciling Ministries Network, UMC Next, and Mainstream UMC all endorsed the Protocol.

It seemed certain the protocol would be passed at General Conference 2020 and we who want to maintain the Bible’s teaching on sexuality and those who wish to change United Methodism’s Scripturally-based standards would be able to go our separate ways. But the COVID pandemic caused General Conference to be postponed and the focus of the church has rightly been on helping those who are suffering during this difficult time. So, the protocol has taken a back seat these past several months.

General Conference is now scheduled for this coming August. There is some discussion about the possibility of holding a virtual Conference with delegates being able to participate online from home or gathered together in several regional centers across the world. Whether virtually or in person, the plan at present is for General Conference to convene in August and to take up the protocol. The protocol and the future of the UM Church will again take center stage.

So, what’s the status of the protocol and the likelihood of its passage? Despite some talk that the General Conference might again be postponed because international delegates may find travel restrictions due to the pandemic (see page 22), we believe it is still on track and will be passed by General Conference this year.

Not everyone agrees. Some bishops have reported to us privately that commitment for the protocol is waning among some of their colleagues. Due to our many years of division and the economic effects of the pandemic, general church apportionments are being paid at the lowest rate ever. More “institutional” bishops are concerned about the future viability of the denomination and what the departure of traditional congregations will mean for the UM Church going forward.

Nevertheless, we are optimistic that by this time next year, General Conference will have made a way for annual conferences and congregations who wish to depart to do so.

No one wants to repeat what happened at the General Conference in St. Louis. Earlier this year Bishop Cynthia Harvey, president of the Council of Bishops, stated her support of the protocol, “We could not continue the harm we were doing to each other; we needed a better way... it became very clear that [separation] was the next step we needed to take.”

The pandemic has changed many things, but it has not changed our need to put an end to the fighting and the division that has done so much harm.

The various advocacy groups mentioned above as supporting the protocol have been the ones in the trenches, strategizing, recruiting, organizing, and competing against each other to carry the day at General Conference. None of these groups has stated a change in their commitment to the protocol.

Recently, the Western Jurisdiction, the most liberal in the UM Church, issued a statement under the heading “Where Love Lives.” In their press release, Bishop Karen Oliveto, president of the Western Jurisdiction’s College of Bishops said, “The Western Jurisdiction is committed to living out our belief that God’s church is open to all. The Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation offers a way forward to begin easing the five decades of pain created by the wounds inflicted on LGBTQ persons by the church.”

It appears that the primary group that might work against the protocol’s passage is the institutional bishops, who are the same ones who have wanted to deny the depth of our division in the past. They are the ones who have offered the false hope that we could find a way to be one church with two different views of the Bible and competing sexual ethics. And they are starting to create the narrative that now is not the time for separation because the institutional UM Church cannot survive it.

We are optimistic. We believe the protocol is likely to pass. But we are also realistic. The battle is not yet over. Voices opposing separation are likely to surface. Progressives have already been to Africa telling bishops, pastors, and delegates they should remain within the continuing UM Church in order to continue receiving the financial support for their ministries they are accustomed to. (They conveniently ignore the fact that the dramatic decline in apportionment payments is already resulting in cuts to funding for African ministry, and that the departure of many traditionalist American congregations will further diminish the continuing UM Church’s ability to financially support ministry in Africa.)

The protocol was negotiated in order to avoid a contentious and litigious separation. Failure to pass the protocol or something like it could result in the acrimonious splintering of the denomination costing millions of dollars in legal fees.

After attending and working for our biblical views at seven past General Conferences, I know nothing is ever certain until the last vote has been taken. I also know how important it is that we remain vigilant and active as we prepare for General Conference.

Traditionalists will continue to reach out to our partners in Africa and in other parts of the world to keep support for the protocol strong. Additionally, we will be staying in touch with bishops who support the cause of a peaceful separation.

We are so close to creating a new future for faithful Methodists. Passing the protocol will allow Bible-believing churches and annual conferences to step into that new day with their property and congregations intact. One last push and the battle will be over.