

An Invitation to Work Together

By Jeff Greenway – January 31, 2020

<https://wesleyancovenant.org/2020/01/30/an-invitation-to-work-together/>

I was recently talking with someone on the other side of the denominational divide about the impact of the release of “The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation.” We shared that since its release most of the conflict between the theological camps of The United Methodist Church has lessened, while debate within the various camps has increased.

It served as a reminder to me that it is going to take discipline to cease struggling with one another as we move into the future. Our present mindset tends to thrive on conflict, and I am concerned we will not be able to adjust to peace. As we traditionalists move into the future, we will need to be intentional about beating our swords into plowshares so we can plant new churches and grow our movement.

For traditionalists, this is an especially important time to come together. Last spring the United Methodist News Service reported that over 44 percent of United Methodists consider themselves to be traditionalists, and even many who identify as moderates lean traditionalist on core theological teachings and ethical issues. These people will be looking for a church they believe shares their values, is excited about proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, and is open to making that proclamation in new and creative ways.

If you find yourself uncomfortable with the choices in the UM Church right now, I understand. Perhaps, for quite justifiable reasons, you have avoided the denominational politics, have kept your head down, and hoped the conflict would be resolved without your having to wade into it yourself. I can certainly empathize with you because until fairly recently in my 39 years of ministry that was my approach. Whether as a pastor serving a local church, a district superintendent, a General Conference delegate, or a seminary president, I did all I could to stay above the fray. When asked, I would describe myself as an evangelical moderate, a warm-hearted, Jesus-loving, Wesleyan Methodist. And not too long ago that description passed for being a “centrist.”

While I adhered to and supported evangelical theology, I did not engage in the political machinations of the “evangelical right.” I appreciated their defense of our core theological teachings, but I was content to stay in a safe zone and allow them to do the heavy lifting. I was traditional, but I was not like “them.” I was quietly supportive, but not connected. I am sure there are still some traditionalists who resonate with my confession.

However, keeping my distance from more proactive traditionalists changed in 2015. It was in that year the UM Centrist Movement, which would eventually morph into UM Next, began to shift the center of the UM Church so that it became, in my mind, more closely aligned with progressives. (I have previously written about that experience in an article you can find [here](#).) And then, after the 2016 General Conference and the election of an openly married lesbian as a bishop, I, like many United Methodists, realized some kind of separation was probably the only way forward for our denomination.

It was in that season I decided I would need to become engaged in our church's struggle, and as circumstances unfolded, I received an invitation to a gathering of traditionalists I had often characterized as "them." With some hesitation, I accepted their invite, but to my pleasant surprise, I discovered "them" were like me: warm-hearted, Jesus-loving Wesleyan Methodists who wanted to move beyond the UM Church's dead-end debate over our sexual ethics in order to create a movement focused on sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed. That movement would become the Wesleyan Covenant Association, and I was humbled and honored when "them" elected me to serve as the chairman of their global council.

From its inception, the WCA believed it was important to prepare a possible landing place for traditionalists if and when the UM Church recognized the need for an amicable separation. As the WCA Council set about that task it met with leaders of new traditionalist Lutheran and Anglican denominations that had already reached the other side of the conflict we are still experiencing. We asked them to share the challenges they confronted as they started new traditionalist churches. One important thing they told us was, "Don't wait until the conflict comes to a head to decide what you want the new Methodism to look like." They said they lost two to three years after their respective divisions before they were ready to move forward. We took their advice seriously and so started preparing for the day when we traditionalists would come together and work to create a new movement.

Another thing our Lutheran and Anglican friends told us was, "People will join a new movement at different times. Be gentle with those who arrive early, and be gracious with those who arrive late." We have attempted to do our work in that spirit. As the chairman of the WCA Council, I can tell you we are not holding what we have developed tightly. We have drafted a *working* document entitled "The Book of Doctrines and Discipline" to serve as a starting point for critical conversations traditionalists will need to have as we move forward. And as we said when we released the document, we certainly do not regard it as anywhere near set in stone. We fully recognize only a convening conference of traditionalists can decide what a new, movement-oriented Methodist church will look like. We have happily received hundreds of comments on what we have released so far, and we are eager to partner with any and all traditionalists as we move forward. We are mindful of the challenges ahead, but we are excited about our future together. We look forward to joining other traditionalists as they surface their ideas for a healthy, vibrant, and warm-hearted expression of Wesleyan Christianity.