

Leaning Forward: Why I Support the Separation Plan

By Joseph F. DiPaolo – January 24, 2020

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For years there has been tension among traditionalist United Methodists between those leaning in and those leaning out – that is, between some who wanted simply to leave The United Methodist Church, and others who felt called to stay and contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). I have been among the latter group, determined to reclaim, renew and reform the institution.

I no longer believe that is possible.

Last year’s special General Conference in St. Louis was supposed to definitively settle our conflict over sexuality, by choosing one of the plans before the delegates, and charting a “Way Forward” for the denomination. The problem (for progressives and institutional leaders) was that the Traditional Plan was not supposed to win! So when it did pass, nothing was settled – and our decades-long conflict only intensified. Progressive clergy, churches and conferences stepped up their campaign of resistance, through defiance of our disciplinary covenant. Many bishops have been complicit, either through overt support, or by failing to exercise any meaningful accountability toward those who break their covenantal vows.

The result? *The Book of Discipline* has become a dead letter, while trust in the institution and its leadership has almost entirely collapsed. And it is nearly impossible to introduce structural reforms to a top-heavy system which requires supermajorities to change the constitution. All this leads to one unavoidable conclusion: the UM Church is irretrievably broken. We need a new beginning.

The recently announced “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation” is the first time that respected leaders of all the major theological and geographical constituencies within the UM Church have agreed on any “way forward.” This is an amazing development, and I believe that through it, God has provided us an opportunity for that new beginning we need.

So now, I am leaning forward.

I can see in the distance a vibrant, renewed and global Wesleyan movement. I can see a new body, united by common convictions, one in purpose and mission, connecting people around the world in a denomination that is more diverse ethnically, racially, demographically and nationally than the current UM Church. The protocol can be the doorway to that future.

Don't misunderstand me; this is not the path I had hoped we would take. It is profoundly sad for me to consider that the communion in which I have served as a pastor for more than 30 years will be coming apart. There is no joy in the prospect of severed relationships, or ministries which will suffer or cease.

But what is the alternative? We traditionalists could stay and fight, and we might be able to garner a slim majority to retain current disciplinary standards in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May of this year. But what then? The progressives will continue their defiance, the conflict will grow even uglier, and many frustrated traditionalists will vote with their feet. Sooner or later, separation will occur, full of rancor, and battles over properties that could drag on in the courts for years. The protocol, if adopted, makes much more likely an amicable separation, minimizing pain and conflict, and allowing for ongoing cooperation in at least some areas of ministry and mission after separation occurs.

For that to happen, we traditionalists need to stand together – dare I say, lean on each other – and support the plan. There is a scene in the movie *Forrest Gump*, when Gump and his best friend Bubba are in Vietnam on a rainy, nasty night, and Bubba says, “I’m gonna lean up against you, you just lean right back against me. This way we don’t have to sleep with our heads in the mud. You know why we a good partnership, Forrest? ’Cause we be watching out for one another, like brothers and stuff.”

If we lean on each other, and watch out for each other, I believe we will soon see the birth of something new and wonderful. As with all births, it will not be without pain and stress. But if we lean – together – on the Everlasting Arms, perhaps the words of Leviticus 26:9, directed to God’s people after another time of bondage and deliverance, will apply to us: “For I will be leaning toward you with favor and regard for you, rendering you fruitful, multiplying you, and establishing and ratifying My covenant with you.”

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