

An Invitation to Stop Fighting and Heal our Souls

By Jeff Greenway – January 21, 2020

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When “The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation” was released earlier this month it generated a wave of reactions across The United Methodist Church. I have not been surprised by the varied responses. It has been my experience that each step in the process toward some form of amicable separation brings with it another segment of our connection that becomes aware of the issues that divide us and the depth of our brokenness.

While I have already worked through my personal grief over what I believe is our inevitable and necessary separation, many people are just becoming aware of the prospect for the very first time. Consequently, a whole new segment of the church has greeted the announcement of a mediated separation agreement with surprise or numbed disbelief.

I have heard and read the following questions: “How can this be happening?” “Why didn’t anyone tell me?” and “Who do *they* think they are?” These initial reactions are often followed by anger and distrust captured in comments like: “I wasn’t in the room, so they don’t speak for me!” “I could have done better!” “I can’t support this! *They* gave away the store!” Or “We need to renegotiate this whole thing!” It can be disconcerting and depressing when we feel powerless over what is happening in our church.

To those who are relatively new to efforts to address the deep divide in our church, I certainly understand the surprise and angst over a proposal for separation. You are grieving. I have been where you are: shocked, angry, or depressed, or maybe all three. And in those moments I was certain I knew *who* to blame, *what* should be done to correct the situation, and *how* to get it done. When my efforts proved futile, I also knew how to wallow in the depression of my denominational angst. It was not helpful. I learned it is important to begin to work through the rest of the grief process and come to a place of acceptance of the new normal so I could build *hope* for the *future*. I encourage you to do the same.

That said, I write to share that I support the protocol. I am not supportive because it is perfect; it is not. There are several things I believe could be perfected if we lived in a perfect church; we do not. We are an imperfect church led by imperfect people attempting to serve a perfect Savior. The theological and ethical rift between those of us in the UM Church is too great for us to repair. We need the opportunity to shape our different understandings of the church's core theological teaching, its ethical values, and its mission without constantly fighting with one another. The protocol provides that opportunity.

I am not supportive of the protocol because "my side wins." It does not. The agreement is the result of an intense mediation process designed not to have winners and losers. Besides, we have done the "winner take all" thing for 48 years and it has only deepened the conflict. Einstein's definition of insanity is "to continue to do the same thing over and over again expecting different results." The protocol gives an opportunity to stop the insanity.

I am not supportive of the protocol because I agree with everything in it; I do not. However, I do believe it provides the least harmful way to do a difficult thing. Over the years we have collectively damaged our witness to the world. The protocol agreement, I believe, offers us an opportunity to serve as a sign to the world that Christians of good conscience can find a way to resolve their differences amicably among themselves without resorting to the civil courts.

I am not supportive because it will be easy; it will not. The decision to end decades of fighting over the presenting issue of human sexuality (and the deeper theological issues it exposes like the nature and authority of scripture, the doctrines of sin, salvation and sanctification) will not be easy. It will take discipline and humility to disengage and lay down the weapons we have developed to fight our ecclesiastical wars, but I cannot wait to see what will happen when we traditionalist pour our energy into our shared mission. The protocol is a pathway to peace that liberates us to fulfill our mission as we understand it.

The main reason I support the protocol is because I am tired and weary of a dead-end battle that harms people across our connection. Contending for the faith, as we understand it, is certainly a noble and necessary calling, but 48 years of constant fighting has not been good for our souls, let alone our witness. I believe we have come to the place where, for the sake of the mission

of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” as we understand it, we need to find a way to bless, send, and multiply our movement. It is time to stop fighting for the good of our souls. The protocol provides a pathway to peace between us.

During my life, I have learned there are times when even though I have had every right to fight and contend for what I believe is right, the healthiest decision can be to stop fighting because it is better for my soul. I have a friend who wisely advises: “When you are tempted to get the last word—don’t!” Continuous fighting is often fueled by our need to get the last word. When we keep fighting it locks us into a life-diminishing, soul-harming cycle that sours our heart and cripples our soul. But when we choose to stop fighting, the Spirit has room to move, peace returns to our heart and joy restores our soul. When I choose to stop fighting it is often good for my soul.

I support the protocol because I believe the souls of many people are at stake. We have many years honing weapons used to fight one another and cause harm. We have spent years between each General Conference restocking and reloading for the next fight. Last spring, our denominational fight exploded on the front pages of newspapers and in the months have followed our witness was damaged. If we do not find a way to stop fighting we will do even more harm to our souls.

The protocol provides a gracious way forward that enables us to bless one another and go forward in peace. For many years we have been honing weapons to fight one another and in doing so we have caused harm.

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