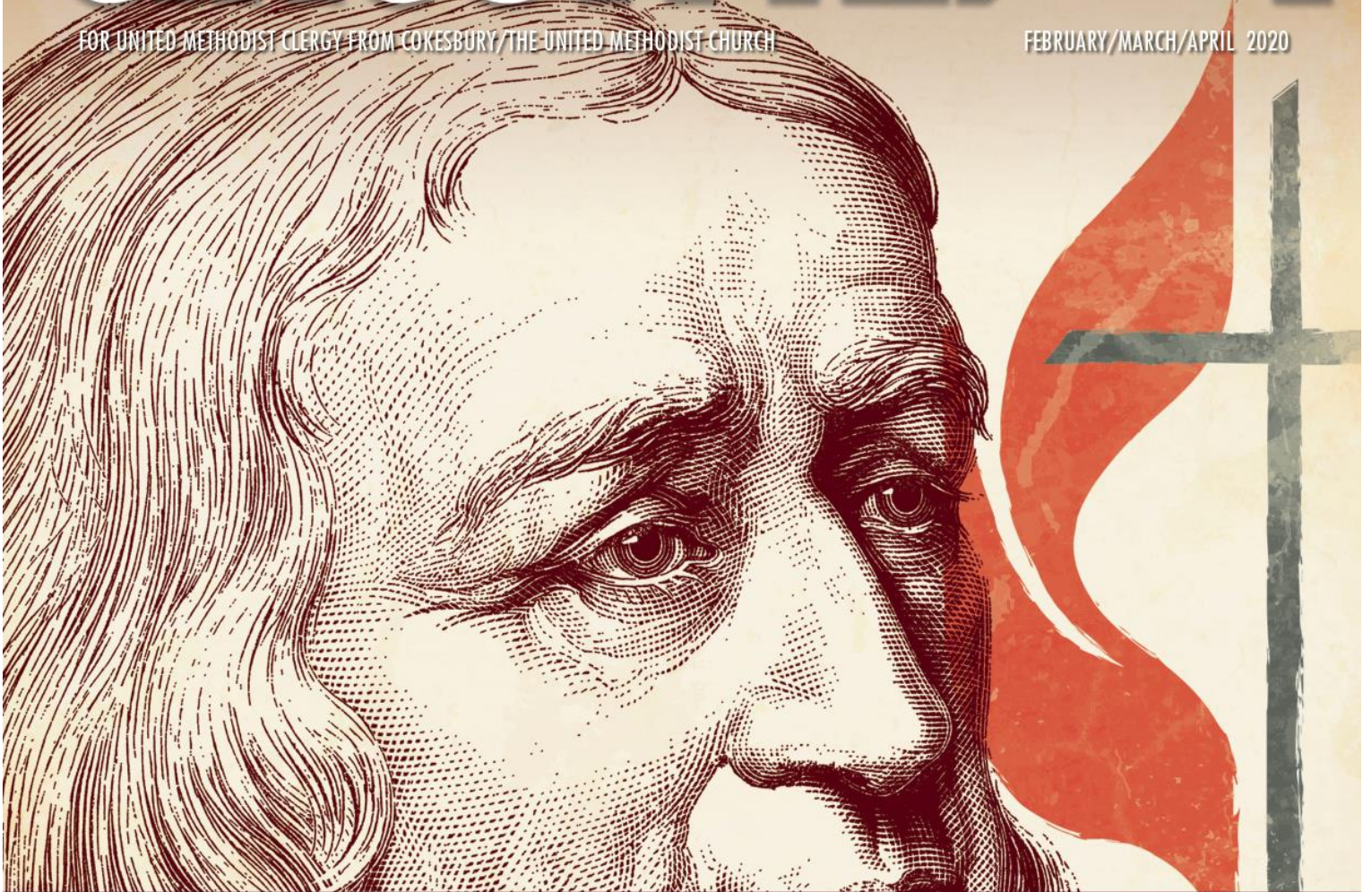


CIRCUIT RIDER



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The of FUTURE METHODISM

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Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Neil M. Alexander</i>	
A Sad Separation	2
<i>William H. Willimon</i>	
Seven Signs on Our Way to General Conference 2020	6
<i>Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.</i>	
How Should Delegates Make Decisions?	8
<i>Lovett H. Weems, Jr.</i>	
The Next Generation UMC Plan	13
<i>Junius B. Dotson, Ginger Gaines-Cirelli</i>	
A Protocol for the Transformation of the World	16
<i>Jan Lawrence</i>	
A N.E.W. Way to Begin	20
<i>Nate Nims</i>	
Whom Christ Sets Free: A N.E.W. Vision for Methodism	24
<i>Jay Williams, Joy L. Butler, Cameron Overton, M Barclay, Kyle Walden, Alka Lyall, Alex da Silva Souto</i>	
Why a Traditionalist Supports the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation	29
<i>Thomas Lambrecht</i>	
The Christmas Covenant: Our Gift of Hope	34
<i>Karen G. Prudente</i>	
Jubilee Freedom Today	36
<i>Fred Allen</i>	
Keeping Unity with Diversity	40
<i>Sungho Lee</i>	
Methodism’s Future: A Filipino Perspective	42
<i>Rudy Juan</i>	
Who Will We Choose to Be?	46
<i>Cynthia Fierro Harvey</i>	
The Future of Methodism Is Not Methodism	50
<i>Edgardo Colón-Emeric</i>	

Introduction

Neil M. Alexander

While the vast majority of United Methodists go about the routines of daily life and worship, pray, study, and serve with their local churches, some prepare to monitor or participate in the May 2020 General Conference. With heightened interest and perhaps some dread, we've read more news articles than usual raising big questions about United Methodism's future.

As United Methodists with contrasting views advocate for dissimilar outcomes in May, *Circuit Rider* asked several to share information and insights about what they foresee and hope for. Writers with special experience and perspectives offer their analysis and prescriptions in the articles that follow. For a visual comparison of each proposal, an overview chart of each plan appears at the end of this publication courtesy of Ask The UMC, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.

Whether you resonate with a writer's assessments or strenuously disagree, an empathetic spirit will help all of us enter for just a moment into the thinking, convictions, and aspirations of Christian friends as we discern what God is calling us to be and do as United Methodist people. May we have ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to love.

Neil M. Alexander is President and Publisher Emeritus of the United Methodist Publishing House.

Editor's Note: Given the proximity of the announcement of the "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" to this issue's publication date, many articles were prepared prior its release. Circuit Rider then obtained articles written to comment specifically on the Protocol and its potential effects on the General Conference proposal landscape. Authors of earlier submissions were then given the opportunity to amend their pieces or note that submissions were written before the Protocol's release.

A Sad Separation*

William H. Willimon

As a young pastor I had a couple in my congregation who told me that though they were going to divorce, it would be “friendly.”

“We don’t want to hurt each other or the children. We just want to be separate.”

This sounded nice to me until one of their lawyers, a member of the congregation, snorted, “Yea, that’s what they all say. It’s the lie they tell themselves to deal with their guilt. A gracious divorce can’t happen—if they were ever in love. Pastor, don’t aid their mutual delusion.”

Ouch.

So now the church called “United” is going public with our friendly separation. We’ve been here before. In 1844, Methodists in my part of the world decided that we were fed up with a decade of debate over whether Methodists could own slaves.¹ We separated, giving all sorts of elegant theological justifications for the split. The Methodist Church South was at last rid of fellow Methodists whose disagreements made us uncomfortable. Safe in our Methodist Episcopal Church South, devoid of debate, our delusions continued for decades (and was overturned a hundred years later by reunion long after the Civil War).

After the ill-considered, ill-led 2019 General Conference, here we are again. The bishops decided once-and-for-all to settle the complex of questions surrounding the place of LGBTQ Methodists (unsolved by five General Conferences in succession) by having a special General Conference and forcing the same people who deadlocked at the last General Conference to vote once again. Publicly, while there were prayers for divine guidance, privately the factions had already decided where they stood. Positions became more entrenched. A series of dense questions were reduced to simplistic labels: left/right, liberal/conservative, progressive/traditional. Strategies were devised for how to coerce others into whatever point of view they had before we started praying. Surprise! A more punitive polity narrowly passed by about the same margins as the previous General Conference. Cost? \$7 million.

A denomination with a chronic condition of debate and disagreement over issues related to sexual orientation and identity acted as if our condition were a problem to be fixed through a once-and-for-all vote. The majority silences the minority and calls it “holy conferencing.”

All that the 2019 General Conference did was make a chronic condition into a life-threatening crisis. The Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation² is not so much an agreement as resignation to the inevitable. The Protocol to be set before the 2020 General

¹ Sometime earlier, white Southerners had talked our fellow Methodist Episcopalians into thinking that Wesley was wrong. So, the church declared that enslavement of others was a personal choice. Abolitionist Methodists disagreed.

² Isn’t “separation” what you get when you fail at “reconciliation” and “grace”?

Conference (will we ever learn?) punts the crisis to Annual Conferences and local churches. Now the battle that defeated the 2019 General Conference is taken to the local level.³

My heart goes out to the pastors and congregations. It's hard to believe that the separationists will be content to take their \$25 million, turn in the keys to their churches, and leave quietly.⁴ In the conference I once served, I'd estimate that two-thirds of the pastors are loyally UMC, in spite of the issues, whereas half of the congregations are sympathetic to the WCA. Pity the UMC pastor who must lead a WCA congregation through the process of voting to stay or to leave.⁵ The last General Conference wouldn't have been so damaging if we had had a knock-down, no-holds-barred debate, sung a hymn, and gone home. Voting produced no solution, just winners and losers. So now that biblically indefensible process is going to be taken to the local church?

What will be left of the UMC after some of our most vital congregations and their vibrant pastors walk away from the rapidly shrinking UMC? Irreparable damage will be done to our institutions such as the publishing house and our world-wide mission organizations. Few of our current seminaries can make it without the Methodist Education Fund. There's no way the \$39 million set aside for "communities historically marginalized by racism" will make up for all that these communities will lose in a diminished UMC.

The one budgetary item that we agree to preserve at all cost? The clergy pension fund. That makes sense; most of the secessionism is clergy-driven, though how long the laity will sit for a clerical dismantling of their church remains to be seen.

Can you feel my sorrow?⁶ All of us UMC leaders are stewards of a church we did not create and beneficiaries of a mission of a centuries-old institution that none of us earned or deserved. Every pastor talking so freely of leaving The UMC was educated, appointed, and sustained by The UMC. And yet, after a scant four decades of debate (not a long in church time) we are disposing of a church that is not ours to give away.

Is that why Jesus is never mentioned in the Protocols?

Separation—paring down the church to those who think as I do—won't work because: 1. The nature of the Body of Christ and 2. The nature of Christ.

When I was ordained in the early 1970s in South Carolina, the bishop could find no congregation for me that wasn't full of people who were wrong about race. When I complained about the low quality of Methodists, the bishop said, "Why do you think God called someone like you into the ministry? You are free to allow God to convert all of them."

³ Among the many inexplicable anomalies in this proposal is its encouragement for individual congregations to vote on whether to leave or to stay. Nothing in the history or present polity of Methodism supports this sort of rampant congregationalism.

⁴ I've yet to meet the Methodists who put money in the offering plate to subsidize the formation of a separate denomination.

⁵ Come on, all you folks who say you are for "biblical authority." Where in scripture do you find justification for church governance through majority vote?

⁶ Anger?

I've been pastor and bishop to hundreds of churches, and I've never served a church where the congregation was in full agreement. Most of Paul's letters are addressed to divided, sometimes bitterly split, churches. Why do you think Paul talked so much about unity and love? It's what pastors do. Unsurprised by Christian differences, we preachers keep working for the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer "that they all will be one" (John 17:21). We keep muddling through, surprised by how much good God can do in a congregation in spite of our disparities, deeply grateful that Jesus said, "Follow me," before he said, "Be of one heart and mind."

To the second point, it's of the nature of Jesus Christ to save people with whom I disagree, many of whom are unhappy that Christ saved and called me. I'm grateful for their obedience to Paul's command to put up with me in love (Eph 4:2). They thereby remind me that we're in the church, not because we are so open-minded, biblically faithful, loving, and inclusive but because Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, put us here.

On most Sundays I'm glad for the church's Jesus-induced diversity. I've grown in my faith and learned much about Christ from people who are wrong about many things. Sometimes, I've tried to set them straight only to have the Holy Spirit intrude and prod me to say words I would never have said on my own: "I guess I was wrong." What if they had walked out midway through my sermon?

Separation is tragic because we thereby shut out some of our most challenging interlocutors and thereby shut out some of the most fruitful work of the Holy Spirit. When the IRD (in those rare moments when they talk theologically) tells me that I am soft on scripture, God help me, they are right! Who among my progressive buddies is going to challenge my biblical interpretation and push me to be a more faithful hermeneut? (And who will the IRD have fun kicking around once I'm gone and they are hunkered down with their boringly homogeneous buddies in Good News and the WCA?)

Go ahead. Get your church all cleaned up. Have everyone swear to your cherished ideology. What are you going to do about Jesus? Our Lord won't stop reaching out and bringing in the "wrong" people, making my church more complicated and tougher to lead than I would like it to be. Just wait until the progressive UMC pastor discovers that she's got folks in her congregation who are just as sexist, racist, and homophobic as the people who walked? Go ahead, covert them out of their homophobia; next Sunday Jesus will demand that you tackle their greed.

If I know anything about Jesus, he'll show up with the nicest same-sex couple and their two children at the inaugural Sunday of the doctrinally-sound, Bible-believing, WCA-certified congregation. Then what? Separate into the Even More Faithful Methodist Church?

Speaking of Jesus (whom we should be talking about), our church once greeted the social, moral challenges of the world with a robust conversionist theology based upon our conviction that Jesus changes everyone he touches. Nothing is fixed and final, no matter how many voted it into the legalistic *Book of Discipline*. My thoughts about LGBTQ issues are different from what I thought just ten years ago. I know no Methodist whose views on race are unchanged from the way I was bred to think. In every church I served, people thought they knew where

they stood on any number of issues—until they heard my sermons. How did that happen?
Jesus.

For me to eagerly say goodbye to you and your slanted take on the gospel is to say that Jesus Christ has ceased to work in your life and mine, ceased converting us, transforming us, opening our hearts, moving us to repent. Because of Jesus, I'm not free to refuse to witness to you nor are you free to storm out and form a church more to your liking so you can stop talking to me.

Michael Vazquez, director of The Human Rights Campaign, has already noted that, "The Church's decision to split leaves many LGBTQ Methodists who want to be fully included in the life of the Church in limbo, trying to determine their place in a Church that has still not embraced them."⁷ No matter how many homophobic Methodists we progressives drive out of the discussion, even the most ideologically pure UMC will still have somebody who lacks my open-hearted, enlightened views. Blame it on Jesus's determination to love and connect with people before they are able fully to embrace him. People like me, for instance.

When somebody threatened to leave my congregation because they disagreed with one of my sermons (or had become incensed by something they saw in the Social Principles), I considered it my pastoral duty to beg them to stay, arguing, praying with them, negotiating. As they pulled their car out of the church parking lot, I clung to the door handle, shouting to them one more reason why we needed them to stay in The UMC and put up with our congregation. Sometimes, by the grace of God, it worked.

Rather than work for a friendly divorce, why don't we expend some energy obeying Ephesians 4:2 and run The UMC the way any competent pastor leads a congregation, asking, "How far can we go toward Christ *together*? How can we do church in a way that helps Christ to keep us *together*?"

It's a heck of a way to be the Body of Christ, yet from what I've witnessed in five decades in the UMC, it's uniquely Christ's way.

**Disclaimer: Because I'm a bishop, I'm prohibited—theologically and historically—from aiding and abetting church separation. Thus, I write as one consecrated to "serve in the ministry of reconciliation" and "to seek the unity" of my church. Whenever talk in the church turns toward exclusion, separation, schism, or divorce, I've promised to talk togetherness. It's my job.*

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⁷ Sanchez, Ray. "United Methodist Church proposes historic split over gay marriage and LGBT clergy," CNN.com, January 4, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/03/us/united-methodist-church-split-proposal/index.html>

Seven Signs on Our Way to General Conference 2020

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

Bishops lead and influence the church in work leading up to a conference (Annual, General). At that point, bishops preside with fairness, according to the rules of conference bodies, helping the delegates to do their best work. In this season, bishops are accompanying conversations across the church and contributing to the dialogue. Some bishops have drafted their own petitions. Others have spoken from their contexts of their colleges (geographical regions), and others from distinctive traditions of the church.

In each instance, this is an expression of our teaching office. And yet in the end the legislative work will flow through the delegates, authorized by annual conferences. According to our polity, they speak on behalf of the church. Most bishops have served in leadership roles as delegates to previous general conferences, and as a Council we respect where our authority ends and where the appropriate work of the delegations begins. As we journey together in these months leading to the 2020 General Conference, these seven signs or considerations offer guidance to the work we will do on behalf of our beloved and yet strained connection.

1. In the U.S. church, we are living in between two realities—the actions of the Winter 2019 Special Session of the General Conference and the actions and statements of the 2020 Annual Conferences. This is the **tension** in which we are living, and it has produced anxiety and uncertainty about our future.
2. The U.S. church is learning about what it means to be a global church, and the connection across our four continents is maturing. Most significant is the recognition of Central Conference Colleges of Bishops that the U.S. should become a “regional conference”, able to adapt the Discipline to its context. The language of **missional partnerships** across annual conferences located across the world is at the heart of our connection. Mission truly is from everywhere to everywhere and is a mutual experience of giving and receiving (Philippians 4:15-19).
3. The nature of our redefined connection is at the heart of decisions to be made at the 2020 General Conference. Will we experience needed **renewal and reform**? Or we will instead experience **destabilization and dissolution**? The former does less harm to the vulnerable and creates more continuity of mission. The latter produces winners and losers and disrupts the lives of ordinary clergy, lay leaders, and institutions.
4. It is possible that we will redefine the connection in a way that gives birth to **two or three expressions of Methodism**: a conservative/traditional stream, which includes but is not limited to the organized work of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and its ecosystem of institutions (publishing arm, mission agency, theological school, etc.); a liberationist stream; and a center/progressive stream. How this develops depends on how much space and separation we need from each other and how much compromise we are willing to make to be in relationship.

5. A focus on **younger generations** and the implications of these decisions for future ministry is a critical factor. Many of those most visible in the conversations over the last years (myself included!) have a few years of active ministry ahead. Some of the loudest voices for division or dissolution are retired from active leadership. And yet, many leaders across our global church have twenty to forty years of service ahead. It is also true that there was a generational shift in the election of many U.S. delegations to the 2020 General Conference. Those who gather will be attempting to construct a house, or houses, in which they can live.

6. There will be a need for **patience** among people who are weary, anxious, disillusioned and on the way to some form of next church; this is difficult. This is based on the complexity of our polity, the nature of a global church, the role of the annual conference in response to decisions made by a general conference, and the sacred assets (people, property, funds) affected by any outcome. Simply put, we will be doing this work for some time. This fact has been one reason for my request for a moratorium on LGBTQ related trials, which do harm to all involved and become the public narrative of our conflicted life together.

7. Across a spectrum, there is an imperative to **avoid the outcome and experience of the 2019 Special Session**. That outcome was narrated by the external media in the U.S. and was then communicated again across the U.S. in local media outlets. Traditional conservatives felt blamed and stereotyped; centrists and progressives left demoralized and ashamed. While the reaction in the U.S. came through elections and actions of annual conference sessions a few weeks later, the response to the May General Conference will take the form of new structures, whatever the outcome.

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How Should Delegates Make Decisions?¹

Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

United Methodists are facing major decisions about our legacy and future in the coming General Conference. Myriad actions taken over many past years have set up an unfortunate win/lose situation, quite common in today's politics but strangely out of character with the generous spirit of our Wesleyan heritage.

When General Conference delegates convene, their one purpose is to be stewards of the United Methodist witness in the world. All their decisions should be made to enhance and extend the United Methodist mission and outreach. Most of United Methodism was achieved long before any of us arrived on the scene. That is a good reminder that we and our current opinions are not the center of the universe. We dare not trifle with this pearl of great price as if it belongs to us alone.

What questions should delegates be asking as they assess plans and options offered? What criteria from our heritage might delegates use in making their decisions?

Begin with Humility and Repentance

A profound sense of humility is essential for all who decide the future of the United Methodist Church.

The *DCA* notes from the 1972 General Conference, where homosexuality was first addressed, contain an observation by a leading social ethicist of the time, Walter Muelder. "I think it is very plain that homosexuality is a very emotional question. The various things that have been said on all sides of this matter," Muelder said, "indicate that our church as a whole has not yet matured its thought on this very complex matter."² Humility recognizes when God's wisdom is still in the process of being revealed within a community of faith.

Humility leads to the repentance our faith requires. [Albert C. Outler preached a stirring sermon](#) just prior to the act of uniting the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968. Words near the end of Outler's sermon seem to be particularly needed today. Of this "new chance" God is giving us with a new denomination, he hoped for "a church repentant in order to be a church redemptive."³ Could repentance be our greatest need in this hour?

Ephesians reminds us that God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to reconcile Jews and Gentiles in the church, and this is a sign of the unity God seeks for the entire universe. Despite

¹ Editor's Note: This article was written prior to the announcement of the "Protocols for Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation" agreement.

² 1972 *Daily Christian Advocate*, 460. Thanks are owed to retired Bishop Bill Lewis, a delegate to the 1972 Conference, who shared his notes with me in which he captured Muelder's words.

³ Albert C. Outler, "Visions and Dreams—The Unfinished Business of an Unfinished Church," April 23, 1968.

differences, the “dividing wall of hostility” (2:14) disappears as all become one through Jesus Christ. The fact that the church today is not the symbol of unity to which a divided world can look for hope highlights the need for repentance that can lead to redemption. The church can, with repentance, indeed become a sign of God’s intent for the world.

Empower Annual Conferences and Local Churches

Decisions are best made at the most immediate level that is consistent with their resolution. Larger entities should be careful not to assume tasks and responsibilities that rightly belong to levels closest to the issues and the people involved. Organizations thrive when they permit as much freedom as possible with only as much restriction as is necessary.

This is one reason that The United Methodist Church calls the annual conference the “basic body of the church,”⁴ and the local church “the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”⁵

Annual Conferences and congregations are older than the General Conference. There were twelve Annual Conference sessions before the Christmas Conference. They continued to meet until the Annual Conferences created the General Conference in 1792. It is time to rethink what the General Conference is—beyond the corporate centralization model of the twentieth century. General Conference can address matters of doctrine, mission, and values while giving freedom in structure and regulations. Different contexts require flexibility and nimbleness.

What might this mean specifically?

Annual Conference and Clergy Decisions. In United Methodist polity, the Annual Conference is the only body that decides who is ordained. No other body can remove clergy. This right has never been delegated to bishops, seminaries, or the General Conference. Over against this history and polity, the General Conference continues to assume more power over clergy matters than is appropriate at the expense of the annual conference who has the responsibility.

Local Churches and Use of Facilities. Who better than a local church to decide how their facilities are used for events, services, and ceremonies? Yet, again, the General Conference has assumed more power to itself to make such decisions. Is any church member interested in telling another congregation how to use their facilities? I doubt it.

Pastors and Pastoral Judgment. Some pastoral decisions should be left to pastoral discretion, and our history has illustrated that wisdom. Between 1884 and 1962, at least one or more United Methodist predecessor groups forbid clergy from performing marriages for

⁴ *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 33, Article II.

⁵ *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 120

divorced persons with a living former spouse, except for the innocent party in the case of adultery. Calls for increased enforcement by bishops indicate that pastoral situations led clergy to violate this restriction regularly. Beginning in 1928 and ending in 1962, all branches changed their policies to leave decisions about performing weddings to the judgment of pastors.

Presume Unity

The unity in Christ described in Ephesians comes through respect for others as valued children of God. Diversity and inclusiveness flourish best not so much as ends in themselves but rather as byproducts of a faith that unites all kinds of people more tightly than any differences can separate.

Schism never looks so inevitable in retrospect. This is not the first time we have faced schism. There are not many such instances in which we can take pride. There are also times when people might have left the church and did not. The establishment of the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction by The Methodist Church in 1939, without a single vote for the proposal from African American delegates, left African American congregations with every reason to leave. They did not.

At the General Conference level, the current debate is driven by those on either extreme who, it appears, can hardly bear being in a church where people disagree with them at this moment about homosexuality. It is true that others vote with them because they share their stance on homosexuality. The crucial difference, however, is that the vast majority may differ on homosexuality, but few of them want to push anyone out of the church and certainly do not want their church dissolved.

Many United Methodists expect schism because that is the kind of secular world in which we live today. It will be very hard for churches to lead the world in breaking down the dividing walls of hostility while perpetuating division ourselves and building more walls.

Set a High Bar for Division

Presuming unity means that the burden of proof is strictly on those who advocate any solution that makes for disunity in the church. What might this mean as decisions are considered?

One group leaves. Such divisions have occurred in our history. Race and slavery were the reason for most, though not all, divisions. Departure is a legitimate decision but bringing chaos to thousands of churches who don't share such certainty and impatience is not. None of us should try to take a denomination or annual conferences with us. They are not ours to take.

Dissolution and non-geographical conferences. This solution is one in which everyone chooses from two or three options. This is the most complex of the proposed solutions. If even

possible, it would take years to accomplish and probably countless legal obstacles. However, this option appears to be supported by those most anxious to separate from those with whom they disagree; it appears to be based partly on the assumption that this vehicle gives them a better chance of garnering more churches to their cause than merely leaving themselves and inviting other churches to follow.

Some proposals call for non-geographical conferences. Such arrangements do not make for unity and cooperation. One example of Methodist judicatories overlapping in geography is between 1844 and 1939 when the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) were in existence. There was conflict from day one. In places where there were MEC and MECS churches, conflict and litigation were routine. This especially became true when the MECS started moving into California and the Pacific Northwest, hardly seen to be border states.

Simple majorities do not make sense. Unity and division are not equal options for a church. The burden of proof rests on those who would disrupt unity. Decisions require more than a simple majority vote to signal the gravity of these decisions.

No forced decisions. Churches can have the right to leave without being automatically removed from their denomination by annual conference action. To the extent that decisions about leaving are made, they should be made at the initiative of local churches. Vital congregations fear being forced to fight among themselves on a divisive issue which they are now handling as a united congregation. The inability of the General Conference to deal constructively with homosexuality issues masks the fact that virtually all United Methodist congregations have found a way to deal with differing opinions without splitting or hindering the work of Christ.

Leave Room for God’s Spirit to Shape the Future

As with all rule-making bodies, the General Conference has power to act only to the extent that those actions carry with them enough moral authority to be accepted. Legislation must rest on a broadly shared consensus that the legislation is necessary, right, and consistent with John Wesley’s passion that all come to know the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In matters of faith and morals, Catholic theologian Hans Küng once said, “[N]othing can be achieved simply by voting. If it is impossible to reach some measure of harmony (not unanimity), then, in accordance with the ancient conciliar tradition, the question must be left open.”⁶

We desperately need to find a way to honor the conscience of all and still live together until that day when God’s wisdom for the future is more clearly revealed in our faith community. There is no need to force final decisions as if we have reached “some measure of harmony” when we have not. Time helps and things change. Have you noticed that no one is now defending a bishop’s right to own slaves, or a segregated Central Jurisdiction, or not allowing women to preach – all of which either split or threatened to split the denomination at one time?

⁶ Hans Küng, *Why Priests?* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 100-101.

One way delegates might think about decisions they make is to imagine that after the General Conference, you will be going to a series of venues where there will be primarily youth and young adults. Your assignment is to tell them what The United Methodist Church did. What decisions would cause those groups to see The United Methodist Church as a faith option for them? Would they see your report representing a church they would like to attend? Would those of no faith be drawn closer to following Jesus? Would they leave the event anxious to tell others their age what they had learned?

As United Methodists prepare for General Conference, let us abandon our pretenses to innocence that prevent any hope of unity, and remember that our unity can never be based on anything but Jesus Christ. And, while we wait for more perfect unity, cannot we unite to become God's redemptive agent in the world to end war, poverty, and racism—the historic causes of evangelical traditions such as Methodism—and every scourge that diminishes others?

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The Next Generation UMC Plan

Junius Dotson & Ginger Gaines-Cirelli

Over the past months, it has been inspiring to witness the people called United Methodists organizing, conversing, debating, planning, worshipping, resisting harm, and praying together in multiple configurations and under various banners. Amid so much holy conferencing and activity, a common movement among those hoping to avoid doing further harm to our church emerged.

This work produced the recent [“Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation”](#) agreement charting a new path forward, one that cements foundational beliefs while accommodating new denominational expressions and provides a path that moves the church beyond hurtful and exclusionary language.

[UMCNext](#) fully supports the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace. We concur with the signatories of the agreement: It’s time to make a way for separation. We are currently at an impasse over controversies about UM social teachings concerning the Wesleyan understanding of holiness, LGBTQ inclusion and church governance. This impasse has paralyzed mission and ministry across the connection. It threatens any forward movement toward vitality and a sustained effort of intentionally reaching new people for Jesus. Our witness and mission hangs in the balance.

We now find ourselves at a Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15) juncture. The witness of the Bible demonstrates that God can use separation of ministry partners like Paul, Barnabas, and Mark to reach more people as the good news is shared in different ways. The Protocol offers us an orderly and responsible way for those so called to part with a blessing, understanding that our Wesleyan roots will always bind us together even as some may choose to branch out into distinctive expressions of the church.

The agreement allows us to not cause further harm to our church and the people that God has called us to reach. It outlines the steps that help us achieve respectful and dignified separation without dissolving the denomination. In fact, we believe dissolving the church and hosting a fire sale of general church assets would constitute spiritual malpractice and do harm to the most vulnerable congregations and communities in our Connection.

Just because we won’t inhabit the same structure anymore doesn’t mean what we built together doesn’t deserve preservation and extreme care. We concur with the statement released by the African College of Bishops stating, “We do not support any legislation that calls for the dissolution of The United Methodist Church. We uphold our values as a connectional and worldwide church committed to ‘Making disciples of Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world’.”¹

¹ Statement issued by The Africa College of Bishops on September 6, 2019 at the annual College of Bishops retreat held at Africa University campus in Mutare, Zimbabwe. <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/african-bishops-issue-statement-on-future-of-united-methodist-church-12903732>

The Protocol recognizes those who are wounded by the harmful language, tired of the fighting, and tired of the institutional baggage that is weighing down our collective witness and ministry. This pain and fatigue is all too real, all too familiar, and an all too real threat to our faith.

These concerns are also at the heart of the Next Generation UMC legislation which provides essential first steps and helpful guidelines for the post-separation UMC to begin moving into a bold new future. **Next Generation UMC legislation** begins with the vision of a reformed United Methodist Church: a UMC that celebrates the core Wesleyan theological tradition with its emphasis on saving grace, perfecting love, personal piety and social holiness, and the call to share the good news of God's liberating love with others.

The Next Generation UMC legislation reflects the vision and commitment of many believers interested in broad reform intended to address historic, unresolved, systemic injustices and to become a fully inclusive, anti-racist, anti-colonial church. We envision a post-separation United Methodist Church that gives birth to hope, meaning, life-giving connection and justice everywhere in the world we are called by God to serve.

The Next Generation UMC legislation eliminates language and policies in our Discipline that violate the First General Rule and its call to do no harm. There are many parts of the Next Generation UMC legislation that are not in conflict with the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace and help us achieve a hope-filled future.

The following pieces of the Next Generation UMC legislation can help define our new future together:

- Amend ¶140 of *The Book of Discipline* to define all the barriers to inclusion we long to remove.
 - One of the new sentences in a revised ¶140 states: *...we commit ourselves to the removal of every barrier that separates one from another within the body of Christ, including ableism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, misogyny, tribalism, and all other forms of xenophobia. By the power of Christ's redeeming and sanctifying love, we commit ourselves to grow in love and understanding until all of the walls that divide us are finally cast down.*
- Repeal the Traditional Plan by removing all language added to *The Book of Discipline* as a result of the 2019 General Conference.
- Remove all harmful language currently in *The Book of Discipline* that discriminates against our LGBTQ siblings.
- Implement a moratorium on all new and pending complaint proceedings related to same gender weddings, LGBTQ clergy, and the implementation of the 2019 Traditional Plan.
- Repeal funding limitations currently in *The Book of Discipline* related to ministry with and for LGBTQ persons.
- Create a Commission on the 21st Century Church designed to lead us into a period of innovation, reform, and renewal. The Commission would be tasked with the following:
 - Assess and reform structures, systems, and policies that perpetuate systemic discrimination in The UMC and offer ways to amplify historically marginalized voices;

- Propose a new constitution that retains core theological statements and draws upon our Wesleyan history of mission and ministry;
- Propose a new governance structure that allows for greater regional autonomy and self-determination;
- Provide for missional connections among regions of the church; and
- Consider the role and relationships of general agencies, and set adaptable frameworks for the number, financial support, and accountability of such agencies.
- Support the “Creation of a U.S. Regional Conference” plan proposed by the Connectional Table.
- Support the Standing Committee on Central Conferences’ work on a Global Book of Discipline that has adaptable sections for different regions of the world.

One final legislative piece called for a 2023 Special Session of General Conference. This allows us to not wait a full four years to continue implementation of initiatives needing continued attention while also providing time for meaningful work on reformation. We will have to rethink the ways we deliver ministry. We must usher in a new understanding of what it means to be connectional in the 21st Century.

We must map out an urgent and achievable plan to clarify our aspirations and how we’ll work through the process to conceive and organize for fresh innovative ways to be in ministry. We have an opportunity to reaffirm our values as a connectional and worldwide church.

The Next Generation UMC legislation doesn’t just deal with the structural separation, but also offers a process to design ministry to meet the needs of the church we desired to be: a church that speaks to the next generation of believers.

We dream of church that is focused on discipleship and a relentless effort “*to win persons to Jesus Christ as his disciples and to help them grow in their understanding of God that they may respond in faith and love...*” (BOD par.1101). We dream of a church that is constantly reforming and creating a culture that does not legislate who’s in and who’s out. We dream of a church that is seeking to expand our global witness without replicating colonialist culture. We dream of a church that is developing new mission partnerships with central conferences but honors new forms of governance.

We dream of a church that multiplies life-giving ministries and missions and is relentlessly focused on making disciples of Jesus Christ. We dream of a church that adapts and creatively lives out our Christian witness in all the contexts in which we serve.

The United Methodist Church has a future, and it is ours to shape.

Rev. Junius B. Dotson is the General Secretary (chief executive officer) of Discipleship Ministries, an international agency of The United Methodist Church.

Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, author of [Sacred Resistance: A Practical Guide to Christian Witness and Dissent](#), is the senior pastor at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC. She previously served as pastor at two other beltway area United Methodist Churches, St. Matthew’s and Capitol Hill. She earned an MDiv at Yale Divinity School and served as a general editor for [The CEB Women’s Bible](#).

A Protocol for the Transformation of the Church and World

Jan Lawrence

“Draw the circle wide,” we sing in The United Methodist Church. These words by Gordon Light and this tune by Mark Miller¹ are a part of our heritage, a hallmark of a denomination that prides itself on the room it makes and the grace it shows. These uplifting and powerful words remind me of our charge: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

And, the world is transforming. Extreme poverty, hunger, and child mortality are in decline. Literacy, democracy, and women’s rights are increasing. And since 1980, according to the Williams Institute at UCLA, 57% of countries have experienced an increase in LGBTQ acceptance.² But while we transform the world, the Church must be willing to transform, too. It is our charge to lead the way in resisting evil, injustice, and oppression. Yet, our Church is struggling to lead. Only four years after the “Uniting” Conference brought together racially segregated denominations in 1968, United Methodists began to push LGBTQ persons into the margins, and we have held them there for almost fifty years, as if we had learned nothing from our years of segregation.

But this circle that we draw as the beloved community is not just for us. It is not just for progressives or centrists or traditionalists. Nor is it just for United Methodists. It is for the fellowship of all God’s children. It is for the sake of this circle that Sierra Leone Bishop John Yambasu invited what evolved to be the sixteen signatories of the [Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation](#) to consider the possibility of something different for our denomination.

Those of us who gathered at Bishop Yambasu’s invitation sought a path to General Conference 2020 that avoided a repeat of General Conference 2019 and provided space between siblings who disagreed on core theological principles. We did not claim to represent all voices of any constituency. On the contrary, we were clear that we could not do that anymore than we could adequately speak as a group for all constituencies within the Church. Mr. Kenneth Feinberg, the skilled professional mediator and expert in alternative dispute resolution who agreed to work with us on a pro-bono basis, insisted that we not grow the group to more than sixteen members. Each of us brought to the table our own voices, our intersections in the Church, the influence of other conversations around the connection, and a vision for Methodism. We each owe a debt of gratitude to the myriad of United Methodists with whom we consulted as our conversations progressed.

It is with sadness that we agreed: The most faithful path forward for the United Methodist mission in the world would be a grace-filled separation that would allow separate bodies to focus on their respective calls. While some present were invited as progressives, centrists, and

¹ #3154, [Worship & Song](#) (Abingdon Press, 2008).

² “Acceptance of LGBT people and rights has increased around the world,” The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law (April 18, 2018). <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/press-releases/lgbt-acceptance-increases-press-release/>

conservatives, most of us attend churches that don't exactly think of themselves in those categories. Yet, the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace establishes denominations along those lines. Fortunately, the timeline for local churches does not force them to make a decision and allows over four years for those who choose to do so.

The table where the Protocol was drafted was an imperfect one. Many of us at the table have spilled much ink and spoken many words about the imperfections of the table and the sense of responsibility we felt to voices not present. The next imperfect table will be that of the legislative committee at the General Conference in 2020. Then, it will be presented to the General Conference – yet another imperfect table. But a succession of tables is what we have. In all our areas of ministry, including the tables where we decide our Church's governance, we must test our ideals and our theology for the fruit they bear. In this Church, ours is a theology of grace. Grace here is brought by sixteen individuals of disparate theologies through a six-month-long mediation process for the sake of the Church's future, and grace must see us through the months to come.

“No one stands alone”

We United Methodists are a people proud of the breadth of our tent; it is written into our name. Now, some ask how we can be faithful yet choose to separate. While we deeply desire unity, the greatest of gifts is not unity but love. After fifty years, we must ask ourselves how we can be faithful yet remain locked in hostility, unwilling to recognize the image of God in each other.

The Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation is our call to release one another. It is a renewed opportunity to make disciples and increase the Methodist mission in the world. It provides the necessary space between us even as we mourn lost connections. The Church is losing generations brave enough to call out our abusive treatment of LGBTQ persons, and it is losing LGBTQ prophets called by God to transform the world. Separating, like untying a knot, may help us to expand again for the sake of the fellowship of all God's children.

Inherent in the Protocol is compromise. Some say that the Protocol does additional harm because compromise implies incrementalism. Others profess that compromise is required in mediation. We knew when entering a mediated conversation that compromise would be inevitable. Some see compromise as a way to refocus on the mission of the Church, as though repentance and reparations for the harm done to LGBTQ persons were somehow separate from the mission of the Church. Some see the separation reflected in this compromise as a sin. Others see it as a sign of hope. If the delegates to General Conference 2020 choose this path, then we transform the Church. We create space where there was little, paths where there were few, and reform where we had gridlock.

“Let this be our song”

Perfecting and voting on legislation is the purview of General Conference delegates, and we can hardly guess at what that process may birth. However, the legislation implementing the protocol, which must be passed without substantive change to hold together will be and does the following:

- ***A resolution that does not require local churches to vote***
The Protocol provides that congregations only need to vote if they disagree with the decision of their annual conference.
- ***A resolution that protects small, rural, and ethnic churches***
This desire was shared by members of the mediation team. By placing the first level of decision-making responsibility on the shoulders of annual conferences, the Protocol would allow local churches to follow their annual conferences without disruptive conversations.
- ***A path that makes separation affordable***
The Protocol permits movement by local churches to a denomination that is formed under the Protocol.
- ***Support for the formation of new denominations***
The Protocol would provide seed funds for nascent denominations
- ***Removal of discriminatory anti-LGBTQ language***
Removal of the language is a feature of the Protocol and is already in legislation before the General Conference.
- ***A moratorium on the administrative and judicial processes related to anti-LGBTQ complaints before General Conference 2020***
The Protocol calls for charges and complaints against LGBTQ clergy and their allies to be held in abeyance. In this season, this moratorium cannot be forced, but adherence to the Protocol creates pressure for bishops to uphold this abeyance prior to the General Conference.
- ***Maintenance of global connection***
The principle of self-determination in the Protocol prioritizes the flourishing of the global Church. A regional conference structure allows for a healthier connection around mission with more regional autonomy.
- ***Safe harbor for LGBTQ people in harm’s way***
RMN, Resist Harm, the UMQCC, and others are actively working to connect, advocate for, and support LGBTQ persons before the passage of the Protocol, during the transition within the church, and after the transition is complete.

“Side by side”

I recently had the joy of worshipping with Allendale UMC in St. Petersburg, FL. Each of us sang, “I am a child of God.” The weekend before that, I attended the Mission Together Colloquy at Lover’s Lane UMC in Dallas, TX. There, North Katanga Bishop Mande Muyambo reminded us that everyone is welcome in the Church, and he suggested that our polity is inadequate for today.

These experiences reminded me of the beauty of our Church and the sadness of this moment. They also point to the potential of our future: a future where LGBTQ people are included in the full life and ministry of The United Methodist Church; a future where we have repented from the sins of racism, sexism, and the marginalization of others; a future where we have repented from our colonialist history; a future where United Methodists across the connection are free to live into a different future.

The Methodist movement has seen many separations and reconstitutions over its nearly 300 years. This will not be the first, and it will not be the last. In this critical moment, we must free one another while we maintain opportunities for collaborative, life-affirming ministry. The Protocol gives us permission to set each other free so that we can continue to be about the transformation of the world. And in this process, we may even find ourselves and our Church transformed.

Whatever happens at General Conference, [Reconciling Ministries Network \(RMN\)](#) is in solidarity with marginalized people across the Church. If delegates vote to adopt the Protocol, RMN is not abandoning LGBTQ children born into the traditionalist denomination or LGBTQ adults worshipping in churches that will not bless them. Nor are we forgetting that our LGBTQ siblings are subjected to great harm in some Central Conferences, often exiled from the very churches that baptized them. As we move toward the Church of May 16, 2020, our ministry may evolve, but our mission will remain unchanged.

May 16, 2020 has the potential to herald a new dawn for our denomination. No matter what happens, we must be willing to encounter repentance. It will not be a day of arriving; it will only be the first day of the arduous work ahead of us. Our charge is to reset, reform, and reimagine The United Methodist Church.

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A N.E.W. Way to Begin

Nate Nims

The television show "Columbo" always began with a crime being committed. Most detective dramas begin with a crime, but Columbo created a unique twist in this genre. What set Columbo apart wasn't that it began with a crime, it was that viewers knew the who, what, where, why, and how of the crime.

The mystery, then, wasn't who killed the butler in the pantry with a candlestick; rather, it was how Columbo would figure everything out. Columbo, even though he seemed inept and disheveled, was an unassuming savant who knew there would be, "Just one more thing" before all the pieces fell into place.

When it comes to the future of The United Methodist Church, many of us are beginning with an end in mind. We know how we want our future to be resolved, and yet, we're still not sure how we're going to figure everything out. Unlike Columbo, the future of our denomination isn't concerned with *just one more thing*, we're concerned with *everything*. What does the future of our church mean for our boards and agencies? How will our witness be strengthened or weakened? What about our extension ministries? What does a dissolved or segmented United Methodism mean for clergy accountability, for appointments, for the United Methodist presence in small towns and rural communities that rely on equitable compensation to have a pastor?

Even though we think we know where things are heading, it feels as if we are fumbling into our future. At this point in the life of our church, I, like many of you, feel as disheveled as Columbo's beige trench coat. Not only are we wrestling with feelings of uncertainty, we're afraid. Our fears are being felt and expressed in a multitude of different ways. Some of us fear that our church is not moving fast enough toward perfection in love. We fear that since our church is not reaching out to or welcoming all of God's children, we are not living into the love that God has for us and needs us to share. Others fear that our accommodation for the world will bring about God's rejection – we are afraid that God's ways are being forgotten, and with that, God may forget us. Others still are afraid that the church we have devoted ourselves to will only continue to drift into obscurity because we cannot think alike and we refuse to love alike.

At a denominational level, the continued questions, the never-ending flow of *just one more thing* to complicate how we get from here to there makes us worry about the future; it makes us wonder if we could delay the inevitable by creating another study or commission to give responsibility to and place blame upon, instead of taking either for ourselves.

Too often our denominational meetings become as vindictive as a Facebook comments section, and yet, even as we drift further apart, we think that we can argue one another into submission. If that doesn't work, we'll use Robert's Rules of Order to get our way – or at least make sure *they* don't get their way. The arguments, procedures, policies, and commissions have led us nowhere.

If the Special Session of the General Conference proved anything, it proved that the Discipline will no longer hold us together. The passage of the Modified Traditional Plan was to be a step too far, not only for progressives and moderates but many conservatives as well. For the first time, our beloved church wasn't simply known for calling some of our kin incompatible, we were known for being vindictive in our exclusion. After all, why would we want to have a conversation about sexual ethics for all when we can ignore the majority and demean a minority? It's almost as if we were looking at a speck in the eyes of our neighbors while ignoring the log in our own.

At a time such as this, we all know that the status quo is no longer sustainable. Carl Sagan wrote, "For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love."¹ Our current struggle is, to say the least, vast. We are a global denomination that, even in the midst of our chaos, is making a vital difference in communities all over the world. For as much as we get wrong, we have, together as United Methodists, helped to make things on earth a bit more like they are in heaven because our faith and tradition has always been grounded and rooted in God's love.

It is with this love in mind that I, sadly, have to say no matter what way forward we take, no matter how loving it may seem, our way forward will do harm. Our three simple rules may guide us, but as we seek to do good, we must remember that we will do harm.

So, we must ask ourselves of the plans before us: What plan does the least harm and preserves the most love?

The [New Expressions Worldwide \(N.E.W.\) Plan](#) begins by offering a new paragraph to the book of discipline between existing paragraphs ¶125 and ¶126. The N.E.W. Plan takes an honest look at the differences that exist in our denomination and states:

The present conflict over "homosexuality" is rooted in deep disagreement over Christology (understanding of the person and ministry of the resurrected Christ Jesus of Nazareth), biblical interpretation (understanding of the role of holy Scripture), ecclesiology (understanding of how church is organized), and social ethics (understanding of the church's role in society). Rather than continuing the conflict, which does significant harm to the vitality of the denomination and local congregations, The United Methodist Church lays itself aside. True to the covenant prayer of the Wesleys, we yield our allegiance to a single denomination for the sake of faithful employment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and reimagine our future ministries and missions. Inspired by the early church, particularly the Council of Jerusalem, we choose to part ways, commending each other's ministry to the grace of God (Acts 15).

The N.E.W. Plan outlines the beginnings of four new denominations that would continue the best parts of our shared heritage while freeing us to live into the fullness of our differences. While being four distinct Wesleyan denominations, these expressions of what was The United Methodist Church may be in full communion with one another as well as part of the global Wesleyan Communion.

¹ Carl Sagan, *Contact* (Simon and Schuster, 1985).

A plan of separation would be presented to a special General Conference, occurring before 2024. This special General Conference would dissolve The United Methodist Church and attend to the practical, legal, and financial considerations that must be taken care of as we support one another in finding our ways forward.

To separate and dissolve our denomination in a just and equitable way, a transitional council would distribute the assets of our general church. The composition of the transitional council will be made of equal representation from each new branch of our family tree. Each of the denominations will name five individuals, including at least two laity. The President of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church will also be a member of the Transitional Council.

To ensure that our general church assets witness to the most love and the least harm, they will be divided equitably and transparently with restorative justice and reparations in mind. The Transitional Council would remain accountable to each of the four denominations and would be in communication with the Council of Bishops, the General Council on Finance and Administration, Wespath, the Connectional Table, the General Commission on Religion and Race, and the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women. This communication would take place, at a minimum, through monthly briefings.

I support the N.E.W. Plan because it witnesses to the best of us while liberating each of our congregations to do the work that God has called us to.

Not too long ago, in a meeting of the pastors of large United Methodist Congregations in Iowa, a self-identified conservative evangelical said that a future for our church that would keep our denomination together – by allowing some, while not forcing others, to bless weddings of LGBTQIA persons and would also allow some, but not force others, to accept LGBTQIA persons as their pastors – was not a church they could see themselves in. They went on to say that most of the new growth and membership of their congregation has come from conservative evangelicals leaving other Methodist churches. The converse can be said of the reconciling congregation that I am the pastor of.

In that meeting, I realized that when we lose the ability to compromise, especially when the proposed compromise means that some don't have to enact any change or compromise, we have lost the ability to be one denomination.

As a progressive, white, straight, cisgender man, and second-generation United Methodist Pastor, I have only ever known the support and care of The United Methodist Church. Even colleagues that have disagreed with me have supported my ministry and acted as my mentors and friends. At previous appointments, in congregations that were not reconciling, I found ways to work with members I deeply disagreed with because no matter what we disagreed about, we agreed that the hungry needed to be fed, the lonely needed to be welcomed, and the community needed to know and experience the good news of Jesus Christ. I have been so supported in my journey and ministry that in my current appointment, a member remembers when I was before the District Committee on Ordained Ministry and told them that I wasn't sure I wanted to be a pastor, but I wanted to stay on the Elder track and figure things out. A calling

that I wasn't yet convicted to was the call that I was nurtured and supported into with grace and patience.

I have only ever known the support and the care of our denomination. My experience of the United Methodist Church, even in disagreements, was centered in grace, so I wanted to believe that the One Church Plan wasn't just possible but that it was United Methodist to the core. But I was wrong, and I lament my support of a plan that would have allowed for the continued discrimination of our LGBTQIA kin.

As we think about our future and what it looks like for us to be in ministry with and without one another, some plans use the analogy of living in the same home but in different rooms. Other plans make it seem as if we might be living in different homes but remain a part of the same neighborhood. And yet, if someone in my neighborhood was being abused, I would want to seek liberation and justice for them, just as if something in my own home were unsafe, I would seek safety for myself and others.

[The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation](#), like the N.E.W. Plan, recognizes the inevitability of our denominational divorce. Together, we must find a way to move forward, realizing that we will do harm, while, above all, seeking to do good as we witness to the justice, love, and grace of God. The signers of the Protocol, while well intentioned and faithful, do not represent the breadth and depth of our diversity. Knowing who was at the table, we should not be surprised that those not invited and included are offered crumbs. Fair representation, democratic conferencing, and transparency is lacking in the Protocol. And yet, perhaps the greatest gift of the Protocol is the blunt honesty that acknowledges we cannot continue our current course. If you like the ideas of the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation, you should look at the published legislation proposed in the N.E.W. Plan.

Imagine what we will accomplish when we take our energies away from our disagreements about the future of our denomination and turn them towards the passions of our local congregations and extension ministries. Maybe, just maybe, we will finally live fully into our mission without excuse. By finding our New Expressions Worldwide, we will be freeing one another to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

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Whom Christ Sets Free: A N.E.W. Vision for Methodism

by Rev. Jay Williams, Ph.D. (he/ him /his) + Joy L. Butler (she/ her /hers) + Cameron Overton (he /him /his) + Rev. M Barclay (they/ them/ theirs) + Kyle Walden (he/ him/ his) + Rev. Alka Lyall (she/ her/ hers) + Rev. Alex da Silva Souto (they/ them/ theirs) for UM-Forward.org¹

* * *

The Spirit of our God is upon us, because the Most High has anointed us to bring Good News to those who are poor...to proclaim liberty to those held captive...and release to those in prison — to proclaim the year of our God's favor. (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-4, The Inclusive Bible)

Failure of Imagination?

Let us, for just a moment, *imagine* liberation. As people called Methodists, might we envision faith-full human flourishing? As Christians, will we embrace the full Gospel of Jesus Christ? As followers of the Way, will we claim a love ethic that empowers the oppressed and outcast?

Now we admit: Imagination is hard. As humans, we struggle to see anything other than what we are used to seeing. We rarely give ourselves permission to dream beyond what we have grown accustomed. We do not permit ourselves the possibility of thinking differently than what we already think we know.

But still, let us try to imagine. And let us imagine liberation, that vision at the heart of the Gospel of Christ Jesus of Nazareth and the prophecy of Isaiah. There, in the holy scriptures, we find a clear vision of freedom from oppression and injustice and evil. And as people called Methodists, we proclaim this Gospel truth in our baptismal covenant and we commit to resist, reject, and repent of these sins.

Yes, as “water-washed and Spirit-born” people, every day we strive to embody the good news of liberation, because liberation is a way of being in the world — a way of following Jesus — a way of showing up that empowers and centers the marginalized, rejected, and disinherited. Liberation is being called to freedom, to flourishing, to living the abundant life as those set free from oppression.

And, to be clear, liberation is *not* a form of post-Christian anarchy — it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, liberation is the sanctification of Wesleyan grace and holiness. At the intersection of personal piety and social salvation, liberation is experienced. Yes, liberation is Spirit-filled Good News that inspires an anti-oppression, empowerment evangelism. The [N.E.W. Plan](#) seeks this liberation and offers a different narrative of what is possible for the UMC in this moment.

¹ [UM-Forward](#) is a collective of United Methodist laity, clergy, and scholars who envision liberation: anti-oppression, human flourishing, and empowerment of the marginalized. Liberation is a spiritual and social way of living — a posture toward the future, grounded in past struggle and present resilience that proclaims: we are loved into freedom.

From Condemnation to Celebration of LGBTQIA+ Persons and Ministries

The painful reality is that The United Methodist Church officially condemns LGBTQIA+ persons and curses their ministries. The authors of the N.E.W. Plan call the church beyond mere inclusion and instead call for the celebration of LGBTQIA+ people². As those who advocated for the Simple Plan (special 2019 General Conference), we declare that simply removing harmful language from the *Book of Discipline* is no longer bearable. By adopting vicious and punitive measures, the special General Conference radically altered our denominational landscape. As heirs of Christ, LGBTQIA+ people are 'entitled' to be loved fully — and not merely tolerated. The constant, repeated, and unrelenting assault upon LGBTQIA+ bodies and souls declares that we are not 'good Christians.' And worse still, the anti-LGBTQIA+ posture of the UMC actually *denies the humanity* of queer persons by deeming a whole host of people unworthy of love, companionship, and ministry. We invite the UMC to reject this evil.

While we cling to the "foolishness of the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 1:18), we are not naïve. For decades now, The United Methodist Church has been engaged in a war of attrition; no one is moving. Not only is infighting bad for the UMC "brand," but it ruins our moral authority and witness as church in the world. This battle continues to inflict irreparable harm upon queer and trans bodies and the Body of Christ. Believing that the divisions within The United Methodist Church are due to deeply-seated differences of Christology, hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and ethics, the N.E.W. Plan calls The UMC to *acknowledge* what is irreconcilable.

It is time to admit that there are different Christianities in The United Methodist Church. Although all United Methodists claim the Wesleys as our denomination's founders, United Methodists have fundamentally conflicting views of what it means to be a Christian. If the UMC's mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," then the *real* question before us is: *What if we can't agree on who Jesus is? What if we can't agree on whom Christ sets free?*

"Big tent" Methodism has become a liability. We are broken. Instead of continuing harm that does violence to the Body of Christ, we call The UMC to set itself aside. True to the covenant prayer of the Wesleys, we yield our allegiance to a single denomination for the sake of faithful employment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And then, we might reimagine our future ministries and missions. Inspired by the early church (particularly the Council of Jerusalem) and informed by church history (with seasons of unification and seasons of separation), we choose to part ways, commending each other's ministry to the grace of God (Acts 15).

Therefore, the N.E.W. Plan proposes that the UMC "take heart" and claim the courage to do a difficult thing and dissolve itself. Although some have argued that dissolution would be 'disastrous' and is practically 'impossible', we believe that death precedes Resurrection and, even though we are in Holy Saturday, all things are possible through Christ Jesus. Instead of haphazard disintegration of the connection through inevitable disaffiliation and financial breakdown, we propose intentional, measured dissolution.

² Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual. The "plus" stands for related communities and nonbinary expressions of gender and sexuality.

In order to live into this future, the 2020 General Conference would establish a Transitional Council that would govern the dissolution process in a just, shared, transparent manner. While other plans (i.e., The Protocol and The Indianapolis Plan) present pre-determined terms of separation, the N.E.W. Plan proposes a pathway that has [not already been ‘worked out’ by a small, selectively-chosen group](#). Our proposed process values the integrity of openness and mutual accountability. Rather than prioritize urgency, the N.E.W. Plan offers a measured response to our intractability. The Transitional Council would recommend a Plan of Separation to a special General Conference held prior to 2024 — and while the Council is doing its work in the light of transparency, there would be a moratorium on charges, complaints, and trials related to LGBTQIA+ persons and ministries.³

Toward the Abundant Life of Human Flourishing

The [N.E.W. Plan](#) envisions a vibrant church living the Gospel and uncompromising on Jesus’ love ethic of full inclusion and affirmation—a church set free from injustice, oppression, and discrimination. It builds the beloved community of the kin-dom at hand. As its authors, UM-Forward leaders are called to make a faithful future irresistible: creating and shaping a way of collective flourishing, intersectional justice, transformative healing, and liberating love. In particular, we lead the church into celebration of queerness and the holiness and beauty of Persons of Color + Queer + Trans folks (POC+Q+T people). We advance the liberation of the marginalized, particularly POC+Q+T, through intersectional justice. Our theology and ecclesiology is well-articulated in [“Loved and Liberated”: A Proclamation from Our Movement Forward Summit](#) (May 2019).

In this light, we strongly believe that there are actually four — and not three — key expressions of United Methodism: liberationist, progressive, centrist, and traditionalist. While some believe that “the left” is of one mind, our analysis offers a much different view. At its roots, progressivism finds incremental change acceptable as a way forward. We must learn from U.S. history and the ways that institutional racism is embedded in the logic of progress. In particular, the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s), the Works Progress Administration (1935-1943), and post-World War II welfare programs benefited some at the expense of others. During these ‘progressive’ periods, white Americans gained extraordinary economic and political advantages while African Americans were being lynched and segregated under ‘legal’ regimes of Jim and Jane Crow.

We, the authors of the N.E.W. Plan, are discontented with delusions of progress. We yearn for liberation. And through the N.E.W. Plan, we move forward to perfection in a way that does not settle for incremental change, compromise, and gradualism.

Some have also argued that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism can only be addressed once racism and white supremacy have been remedied in The United Methodist Church. Unfortunately, this is the same misguided “wait-your-turn” argument that black men

³ See um-forward.org/new-plan and [FAQs](#).

made toward black women during the Civil Rights Movement. Womanists, however, would not allow the experiences of African-American women to be subjugated by “race men.”

Today, we cannot allow toppling cis-heteronormativity and patriarchy to be a “wedge issue” that divides the disinherited and marginalized. As Audre Lorde has forcefully asserted, there is no “hierarchy of oppressions.”⁴ As a result, the N.E.W. Plan claims that because we are connected to one another, we must also see the interlocking intersections of injustice. “*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere*,”⁵ as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote in his [“Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”](#) Racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, ableism, and homo/transphobia share a common logic — oppression. Yes, the Spirit of the Most High is upon us, and it’s time — past time — to release the captives.

So, what if we took the Gospel of Christ Jesus of Nazareth seriously enough to live into Jesus’ love ethic of full inclusion?

What if we pretended, for just a moment, that our primary allegiance is not to a denomination but rather to the truth of the Gospel? Because as 18th century theologian G.E. Lessing made clear: the “religion of Christ and the Christian religion are two quite different things.”⁶

And the good news is that it does not have to be the way that it is — a still “more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31) *is* possible. Might we, then, not succumb to “weak resignation” and fall victim to small thinking?

During this moment in time, failure of imagination is sin that conforms to the corrupt powers of this present age. Since we have spent so much time fighting, perhaps now it’s time to invest in flourishing — empowered and guided by the “God of Grace and God of Glory.”

Rev. Jay Williams, Ph.D. (he/ him/ his) is lead pastor of Union Boston, a 200-year-old multicultural faith community committed to liberation, justice, and radical love — and the UMC’s first historically black reconciling congregation. As a young lay person, Jay led the Western NY delegations to GC2000

⁴ Audre Lorde. “There is no hierarchy of oppressions.” *Bulletin: Homophobia and Education*. Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1983.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” April 16, 1963. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html, paragraph 4.

⁶ G.E. Lessing, “The religion of Christ” (1780). In H. Nisbet (Ed.), *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge) pp. 178-179.

& 2004 and will lead the New England delegation to GC2020. Jay is a cisgender, black queer man, striving to help disinherited people find their voices.

Joy L. Butler (he/her/hers) is an advocate, an activist, and a fourth-generation Methodist lay leader. Her decade of opening hearts, minds, and doors in faith contexts in Texas includes speaking at SXSW 2018 and her work has garnered 2019 allyship awards from Daughters of Billitis and Austin PRIDE. Joy currently serves as the coordinator for Pride Interfaith Partnership in Austin and nationally with UM-Forward and Love Prevails.

Cameron Overton (he /him/ his) is a social worker and the lay worship pastor of Zao MKE Church, a new and growing church plant in Milwaukee WI, with a diverse leadership team, majority queer, trans, and POC all under the age of 40. As a young, black, queer and trans person, Cameron's ministry calling is to build the church into an intersectional and queer liberated space.

Rev. M Barclay (they/ them/ theirs) is a bisexual and nonbinary trans deacon in the UMC. They are the Cofounder and Director of [enfleshed](#) where they create and facilitate spiritual resources for collective liberation.

Kyle Walden (he/ him/ his) is in his second year at Boston University School of Theology working towards a Master of Divinity and is a certified candidate for ordination in the United Methodist Church in the North Texas Annual Conference. Kyle is a lifelong Methodist who believes that the Church needs to be continually transformed by God and to be co-creator with God in the transformation of the world.

Rev. Alka Lyall (she/ her/ hers) is a life-long Methodist, who is at the table fighting for the inclusion of those who continue to be voiceless and excluded. She grew up in the Methodist Church in India and came to the United States in 1996 as a seminary student. Alka will lead the Northern Illinois Conference delegation to the 2020 General Conference.

Rev. Alex da Silva Souto (they/ them/ theirs) was born and raised in Brazil. They are a queer immigrant of color serving as an elder in full-connection at the New York Annual Conference. They were the founding co-convenor of the UM Queer Clergy Caucus until GC2019, and currently serve on the executive team for UM-Forward, Global Justice Coordinator for MIND, and pastor of New Milford UMC.

Why a Traditionalist Supports the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation

Thomas Lambrecht

There are times when followers of Jesus have believed that separation from one another was a better way forward for spreading the Gospel. Paul and Barnabas quarreled over the advisability of taking Mark with them on their second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-41). “They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.” The result was that Paul took Silas and Barnabas took Mark, each team visiting a different territory, thus multiplying the mission outreach of the church. The time has come for The United Methodist Church to separate so that we can multiply the missional outreach of the church and free ourselves from a debilitating disagreement.

The St. Louis General Conference highlighted the depth of the irreconcilable differences present in The United Methodist Church. Rather than continuing the quarrel over homosexuality at the 2020 General Conference, several groups have proposed plans of separation for the denomination. A group of centrist and progressive leaders has proposed the Next Generation UMC Plan. A group of centrist, progressive, and traditionalist leaders has proposed the [Indianapolis Plan](#). A group of liberationists has proposed the New Expressions Worldwide Plan.

Recently, a new plan has been proposed that was developed out of intensive mediated negotiations that included traditionalists, centrists, progressives, bishops, and persons from the central conferences outside the U.S. This [Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#) takes concepts from both the Indianapolis Plan and the Next Generation UMC Plan and arrives at a compromise that all the negotiators could support.

[As one of the team that developed the Indianapolis Plan](#), I am now supporting the new Protocol plan for separation. The Protocol plan is not perfect; in fact, I find several parts of it very difficult to accept. But given the current circumstances, I believe it is the best opportunity that our church currently has to definitively resolve the conflict that is tearing us apart and to help all parts of the church move into a positive focus on disciple-making and world-transforming ministry.

How are the two plans alike?

One reason I support the Protocol plan is that it is very similar in concept to the Indianapolis Plan. They both envision a clean separation into new denominations of Methodism with ongoing or future cooperation dependent upon mutual agreement. They both provide for a choice between two main denominational options:

- A continuing United Methodist Church will change to allow same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing LGBT persons.
- A new traditionalist Methodist church will maintain the current position of welcome for all people, while continuing to define marriage as between one man and one woman and require that clergy exhibit celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in a heterosexual marriage.

Both plans permit other denominations to develop if they meet the requisite qualifications. Both would allow central conferences, annual conferences, and local churches to vote on which denomination to align with, while not requiring any entity to take a vote. If a local church disagrees with the choice of its annual conference, that local church could take a vote to align with a different denomination than its annual conference. Bishops and clergy could freely determine which denomination to align with, assuming they meet the denomination's qualifications. Both plans maintain clergy pension benefits intact without reduction and allow clergy to continue participating in pension programs through Wespath.

Both plans allow local churches that separate from their annual conference to keep all their buildings, property, and assets (as well as liabilities) without any payment to the annual conference. Both stipulate that central conference and annual conference property, assets, and affiliated institutions would remain with that conference in whatever denomination they choose. Under both plans, local churches could choose to withdraw from The United Methodist Church and become independent, but such a decision would require the local church to pay additional apportionments and pension liabilities.

Both plans allow the post-separation United Methodist Church to repeal Traditional Plan provisions enacted in St. Louis (2019) and remove all prohibitive language around same-sex marriage, ordination of practicing LGBT persons, and declarations that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Both plans provide for a suspension of all complaints and judicial processes related to these requirements in the *Book of Discipline*. This post-separation United Methodist Church could also make whatever structural changes it wants to, such as creating a U.S. regional conference and restructuring the general boards and agencies to serve what will probably be a smaller denomination.

Both plans allow the new Methodist denominations that may be formed to contract for services from UM general boards and agencies should they desire to do so. Mission partnerships and cooperative projects could continue, especially those benefiting the mission work in the central conferences outside the U.S.

The basic outlines of the process of separation and how the denominations will look afterward are quite similar in the two plans.

How are the two plans different?

Of course, some of the crucial details of the two plans differ. One positive difference for the Protocol plan is that it contains an agreement on allocating some of the general UMC unrestricted reserves to the new Methodist denominations. \$25 million would be set aside for a

new traditionalist Methodist church, and \$2 million would be set aside for any other denominations that develop under this plan. By contrast, the team that developed the Indianapolis Plan could not reach agreement on how to allocate assets between the churches. Having this matter settled by the negotiation should make it much easier for the General Conference to come to a decision.

The biggest difference between the two plans is in the area of voting percentages. The Indianapolis Plan saw the choice as between equal alternatives and thus agreed to a simple majority vote to decide alignment at all levels of the church. In the Protocol plan, central conferences need a two-thirds vote to align with a different denomination than The United Methodist Church. Annual conferences would need a 57 percent vote to align differently. Local churches, however, could choose whether their vote would be two-thirds or a simple majority. Thus, the most important vote at the local level could be decided by a simple majority at the discretion of the congregation's church council.

Under the Indianapolis Plan, funding for ongoing central conference operations (bishops, annual conference expenses) would continue at the current levels for the 2021-24 quadrennium. Under the Protocol Plan, the post-separation United Methodist Church would determine those funding levels based on resources available. On the other hand, the Protocol plan would set aside \$39 million to assure that current funding levels would continue for the next eight years for U.S. ethnic minority ministry and Africa University. (This provision was made possible partly by the traditionalists agreeing to forego \$13 million that they could otherwise have received.) Churches in the new Methodist denominations would be able to access and benefit from these funds, as well.

Another key difference is the use of the United Methodist name and the cross-and-flame logo. The Indianapolis plan would permit all denominations formed out of the separation to use the name and logo with a modifier to distinguish one denomination from another. (Such use would be permitted, but not required.) The continuing United Methodist Church would also have to add a modifier, so that no one denomination would keep the old name – all would have a new name, signifying that all are in effect new denominations (even though one would continue the current UM *Book of Discipline*). By contrast, the current thinking in the Protocol plan as this article goes to press is that new Methodist denominations could not use any form of the United Methodist name or logo after a transition period. (They could still use the individual terms “United” or “Methodist,” but not the two together.)

Other less-important differences will become apparent to those who delve into the details of the two plans.

Why do I as a traditionalist support the Protocol Plan?

In 2019 at the special called General Conference, traditionalists made a good-faith effort to reform The United Methodist Church. Since 2011, the problem has not been what the *Book of Discipline* said, but the fact that a growing segment of the U.S. church had determined to ignore the church's teachings and requirements. Clergy increasingly performed same-sex

weddings. Boards of ordained ministry increasingly recommended persons for ordination who did not meet the *Discipline's* standards. Even a retired bishop very publicly performed two same-sex weddings. Bishops in the Western Jurisdiction and elsewhere increasingly dismissed legal complaints against those who did not abide by the *Discipline*. The ultimate example of disobedience, of course, was the election in 2016 of a woman married to another woman as a bishop of the church.

The impetus of the Traditional Plan in 2019 was to regain the unity of a church in schism by enforcing compliance with the church's teachings and standards. Traditionalists believe that if one is going to claim the name of United Methodist, one should live by what the church says. Much of the Traditional Plan passed in 2019 and key parts were declared constitutional. However, the response was not unity in compliance but a radical deepening of the schism. The determination not to live by what the General Conference enacted grew deeper and much wider, particularly among clergy and bishops in the U.S.

It has become evident that the only way to resolve the deep theological and ecclesiastical conflict in our church is some form of separation. Even most centrists and institutionalists, who fought tooth and nail to keep any kind of "exit path" out of the 2019 Traditional Plan, have come to see separation as the only constructive way forward.

The risk now is that, instead of fighting about the presenting issue of marriage and sexuality standards or fighting over whether the church should separate, the General Conference will fight over **how** the church should separate.

The Protocol plan is the only plan for separation that has the support of leaders of advocacy groups across the theological spectrum. If that agreement extends to the advocacy groups they represent, it is a hopeful development in the attempt to shift from fighting toward working together to find an acceptable solution. If few or none of the advocacy groups opposes the Protocol plan, it stands an excellent chance of passing General Conference.

* * *

Many have said that the Protocol plan is not fair to traditionalists, as those who represent the majority of the global church and its long-standing teaching should not be the ones to separate. However, there is a higher value here than fairness: It is faithfulness.

The Protocol plan is the best chance the church has to allow all the different factions in the church to live into and serve faithfully their deeply held convictions. As a traditionalist, I would rather spend my time and energy building a new, Scripturally-based, Christ-centered, outreach-oriented ministry that focuses on making transformed disciples of Jesus Christ than on fighting over old wineskins.

It is time to put the conflict behind us and embark on a new faith adventure with God. I hope that we can be the first major mainline denomination that reaches a Christ-like amicable separation in which we respect each other as fellow followers of Christ with different opinions over the definition of marriage and clergy standards. Let us not follow in the footsteps of our Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Lutheran brothers and sisters, who experienced a bitter

separation that tore apart relationships, severely compromised their witness, and cost tens of millions of dollars in lawsuits. We have a chance to take the road of peaceful, respectful separation rather than acrimony.

The Protocol plan provides an efficient process that is keenly sensitive to the differences in and among our local churches. It requires no constitutional amendments, can be passed by a majority at General Conference, and can be implemented immediately. For many who are ready to move on from the conflict, the short time frame allows immediate relief. Current thinking is that annual conferences and local churches may begin living into the new alignment as early as January 1, 2021. At the same time, the window for local churches making decisions would remain open until the end of 2024, allowing plenty of time for those who are not ready to decide.

When one evaluates the Protocol plan, one must ask if it is better than the likely alternatives. Any plan of separation that does not have broad support will engender another conflicted General Conference that runs the risk of degenerating into another St. Louis. The passing of any plan – whether a strengthening of the Traditional Plan or one of the other separation plans – by a narrow margin runs the risk that it will not be complied with. We have found that the church cannot force compliance with its policies where there is widespread refusal to conform. Where bishops and clergy are determined to resist the church, we degenerate into anarchy and inflict harm on congregations and members.

Can we envision a peaceful and fair separation that would provide a pathway to new denominations of the Methodist movement so we can all make new disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? These new denominations, though separate, will continue the rich heritage of Methodism while being free to share their respective witnesses for Christ unhindered by those with whom they have been in conflict. That is a future I can live for and supporting the Protocol plan seems to me the best way to get there.

***Thomas Lambrecht** is an ordained elder in the Wisconsin Conference and served in pastoral ministry for 29 years. He is currently serving as the vice-president and general manager of Good News and is the convener of the Renewal and Reform Coalition.*

The Christmas Covenant: Our Gift of Hope

Karen G. Prudente

Several Central Conference delegates to the 2020 General Conference have proposed a covenant to seek a new unity for The United Methodist Church and invite other delegations to endorse the covenant.

["A Christmas Covenant: Our Gift of Hope"](#) includes a preamble, values statement, and outline to their petitions, which will be offered for passage by an annual conference session in February under an additional name: #LoveEveryoneBorn. The Christmas Covenant, created in collaboration with United Methodists holding membership in central conferences around the world, reminds United Methodists that we are united in mission and accept diversity with love. Regarding the name, Rev. Jonathan Ulanday of the East Mindanao Philippines Annual Conference notes that "the Christmas Conference of 1784 gave birth to the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. Our prayer is that this Christmas Covenant could be a rallying point for a renewed and revived United Methodist Church around the world."

"It is noteworthy that this effort comes from leaders in our central conferences," states the Rev. Jonathan Ulanday, General Conference clergy delegate from the East Mindanao Philippines Annual Conference. "This changes the narrative that central conferences, especially in Africa and the Philippines, would just agree with what the American church decides to do. This covenant is our humble gift of hope and love to our global denomination as we seek to find a way to faithfully engage in mission together."

The Christmas Covenant seeks to turn back the tide of division and dissolution. From the Covenant:

"Distracting from and detrimental to ... our common mission are calls to dissolve or dismember The United Methodist Church, to liquidate its assets and distribute them to the highest bidder. Such plans are harmful to the Body of Christ through whom people of faith seek to connect and live in gracious relationships. Pitting one part of Christ's Body against another also harms our witness to a world awash in violence and injustice. Our constitution's preamble states clearly that the church's 'very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission.' Therefore, we are in firm agreement with the bishops of both Africa and the Philippines, who in separate resolutions, have declared their strong opposition to dissolution."

Drawing inspiration from African, European and Filipino values and concepts, the Christmas Covenant includes a series of proposals to reshape United Methodism to be in gracious relationships with one another to better fulfill the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, including:

- Suspension of all actions furthering any dissolution or separation plans and liquidation and distribution of the assets of The United Methodist Church;
- Formation of a U.S. Regional Conference;
- Renaming Central Conferences to Regional Conferences;
- Establishing legislative equality for central and jurisdictional conferences.

The Rev. Hilde Marie Movafagh of the Norway Annual Conference reflects that “I have not given up on the United Methodist Church. Splitting up will hurt our church for a long time and will set back our global mission. We cannot afford that. We are stronger together in the midst of diversity. In the current conflict, I think it is better to stay together, but decentralize authority to embrace our diversity and do mission differently in different contexts.”

The Rev. Dr. Betty Masau of the North Katanga Annual Conference, DR Congo imparts that, “Valuing and sharing the image of God in each and every person is the key to unity of the church. Recognizing the uniqueness and gifts of contextual diversity through our interconnections strengthens our relationships and being in mission together.” Olive Beltran, Vice-President of the Philippines National UMW Society for Christian Service in the North Central Philippines Annual Conference agrees, reminding us “We are one body in Jesus Christ and created in the image of God. As UMC members, we have the freedom to serve God in our own excellent ways regardless of differences in missional context.”

The delegates sought feedback from other delegations and will make the petitions publicly available after they are passed this February by an annual conference session that has done the necessary discernment. While the petitions deadline has passed for individuals to submit legislation to General Conference, annual conference sessions have a later date by which they can submit legislation.

Those who wish to support the Christmas Covenant may sign using this link:

<https://tinyurl.com/ChristmasCovenant>.

Karen G. Prudente is a lifelong United Methodist and a member of Christ Church United Methodist, a progressive and reconciling church in Manhattan. For 17 years, she served as Assistant Treasurer and created dynamic programs as Executive Secretary for International Ministries for the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, the mission agency of the United Methodist Church.

Jubilee Freedom Today

Fred Allen

The concept of Jubilee is drawn from the book of Leviticus, in which a year of Jubilee is celebrated every fifty years. “This fiftieth year is sacred—it is a time of freedom and of celebration when everyone will receive back their original property, and slaves will return home to their families.” (Leviticus 25:10, CEV). During the Jubilee year, social inequalities are rectified, slaves are freed, land is returned to its original owners, debts are canceled, and forgiveness and reconciliation prevail. Jubilee is Freedom that frees one from disgrace! Frees one to claim forgiveness and redemption! Frees one to embrace other cultures and races! And frees one from fear of touching and connecting with other persons who are divinely different but beautifully created in the sovereign image of God.

Since The United Methodist Church has just recently celebrated its Jubilee Year (2018), it is most befitting that we focus on this concept as we approach the 2020 General Conference. After the passage of “The Traditional Plan” at the 2019 Special Session of General Conference and with so many additional plans in the works, it is imperative that the 2020 General Conference and the entire UMC constituency hear and embrace the concerns and positions of Black United Methodists. Many Black lay persons and clergy have been in conversation to identify as many possible options for negotiating the sustainability, security, and preservation of the life and ministry of Black United Methodist Churches.

The continuity of Black Church mission and Black preaching in The United Methodist Church and in the United States stems from a central focus: **Freedom!** But these exhortations on freedom have had a two-pronged emphasis: freedom from sin and freedom from slavery. Black churches and their ministries continue to emphasize both conversion from sin and release from the oppression, brutality, and dehumanization that continues as a result of American slavery and its legacy of racism.

There are myriad social elements resulting from the horrific injustices of the Diaspora—a term historically used to describe the experience of the Jews who were dispersed from Judah in the sixth century and exiled in Babylonia, but now also used to define the forcible dispersal of peoples of African descent beyond the boundaries of the continent of Africa via the kidnapping and importation of Africans to the United States—and institutional slavery. Throughout the annals of history there is not to be found any institution and practice of slavery as insidious as the system of chattel slavery in America. For many enslaved blacks, the outcome of the Civil War as well as Emancipation was comprehended as a divine event of deliverance. Reconstruction predicted realization of the biblical promise of freedom. But the prediction proved to be little more than a brief glimpse.

With the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision establishing the legality of “separate but equal”, the stage was set for what became known as the Jim Crow South. This system of segregation meant white privilege and white supremacy maintained the South as an economic death zone of tenancy farming for black persons until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s opened the door to a new day. Poor whites were kept at the throats of black communities by the ever-promulgated

threat of a “black take-over.” Lynching and rapes maintained a climate of terror that ensured quiet compliance. Crop prices, wage rates, seed credits, loans, tool rentals, etc. were managed by the old plantation families so that wealth and power remained largely centered in the institutions they controlled.

Generations of such slave-generated and segregationist wealth were used by European-Americans to establish churches and legitimate business empires while disenfranchised African-Americans struggled with the paralyzing effects of legalized discrimination. Even the congressional promise of “forty acres and a mule” went largely unfulfilled. And while John Wesley abhorred the practice of slavery, these insidious acts of racism and discrimination against persons of the African Diaspora shaped and influenced Methodism’s development across the United States.

An understanding of this early history of relationships among Black and White Methodists is important to understand the creation and elimination of what came next: The Central Jurisdiction. I will not go into detail here but will refer you to three works: [*Methodism’s Racial Dilemma*](#) by Bishop James Thomas; [*Black People in the Methodist Church*](#) by William B. McClain; and [*Black United Methodists*](#) by J.H. Graham with a foreword by Bishop Forrest C. Stith.

With the reunion of the Northern and Southern Methodists, joined with the Methodist Protestant Church in 1939, Blacks were set apart into The Central Jurisdiction to satisfy the prejudices of the South. This was a unique jurisdiction since, unlike the others, it was racially based rather than geographically determined. Although there were other issues, none of them rose to the importance of the question of what to do with black members.

In spite of the prevailing plague of racism and segregation there was no mass exodus from the Methodist Church. *Why did Blacks stay and participate in the Church through The Central Jurisdiction in the face of the taunts from other Black churches that they were a part of a “Jim Crow” church?* They believed that their presence was important. Bishop Thomas states two reasons:

1. An “instinctive conviction” that the Church’s historic connection with Black people represented a basic intention to build brotherhood among all persons and that the membership of Blacks would help to achieve this goal.
2. The vigor of the Church’s outreach to Blacks, beginning in slavery and continuing with the building of schools for the freedmen after the Civil War.

So even now after 81 years, this is a pivotal time in the history of Black United Methodists when some are asking the same question: Why do we stay in The United Methodist Church? There is a call for The United Methodist Church and particularly Black United Methodist Churches to contemplate a direction for our future.

Our great United Methodist Church is struggling with a number of models and structural changes to save itself. As people of freedom, though not the majority culture or color, our voice and vote must count in 2020. Before we are seduced by various factions, we need to remember what our priorities are, and how can we achieve them. This leads us to present the [Jubilee Freedom Today](#) resolution¹:

Now, therefore, be it resolved that,

The 2020 General Conference of The United Methodist Church take action to maintain and enhance our identity as The United Methodist Church by embracing a full and diverse membership which empowers all constituents (lay and clergy), especially racial/ethnic groups seeking to establish and strengthen congregational life; engage in multicultural ministry; integrate diverse congregations and multicultural staff; and create an equitable formula for clergy appointments, including cross-racial lead pastor appointments and extension ministries appointments. This resolution will hold the church accountable to its Global Social Principles and biblical mandates regarding people of color and ministry to the poor as it goes through its transformation to become the beloved community of God all while incorporating the rich legacy, heritage and contributions of the Black Church.

Be it further resolved that regardless of which churches choose to disaffiliate, they may do so under the principles of Biblical Jubilee without penalty, retribution or harm.

In the event that Black Churches and other racial ethnic UM churches feel led to disaffiliate with The UMC, certain conditions encompassing the principle of Jubilee should be in force:

1. The church's property deeds be released from The UMC to be legally owned by the congregation under its property deeds as an act of repentance and reparation.
2. All UMC National Plans and Africa University be fully funded for the next 12 years, no matter what new reconfiguration or shape the church may take to guarantee the survival and growth of remaining, existing and emerging congregations. It must be ensured that the National Plans can continue their missions and have full representation and voice in the policy making decisions of the church. Also, the church will continue to recognize and support the five Racial Ethnic Caucus groups as official entities of the church.
3. Biblical Jubilee will become the normal practice of freedom and of celebration when every member (lay and clergy) will experience just and equal opportunities in all units and program areas of the church including parity in clergy appointments and lay staffing assignments.
4. Debts of arrears in apportionments and benefits are canceled for small rural and urban churches that are experiencing severe financial crisis due to such current realities as gentrification, unemployment, aging demographics, etc.
5. More intentional and consistent programs of recruitment, training and empowerment of youth and younger adults who follow their call of ordained and lay servanthood ministry should be established.

¹ The full resolution text can be found at the Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century website: <https://sbc21.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/9-18-2019-Final-revised-draft-FA-2020-GC-Resolution.pdf>

6. We must grow into being a Global church in polity, organization and spirituality. When conferencing and allocating funds, the Church must consider our unique cultural and political differences—which affect decision making at General Conference—and fund ways to improve communications, cultural competences, global travel, clergy and lay training, and program development.

Black United Methodists continue to dream, to hope, to envision the body of Christ as truly comprised of all God's children. This hope, born out of our grief, pain and suffering, and our belief in the eternal hope of God, is a transformative hope which takes its historical context from our desire for change. May our hope bear out Jubilee Freedom Today!

***The Rev. Dr. Fred A. Allen** is the National Director of [Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century \(SBC 21\)](#) and is a retired clergy member of the New York Annual Conference. Dr. Allen has been a national leader in the United Methodist Church for many years as well as involved in international mission work. He earned degrees from Tennessee State University, Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Mo., and Drew University School of Theology in Madison, N.J. Dr. Allen is married to Christine and is the father of four children.*

Keeping Unity with Diversity

Sungho Lee

Last year, we had a “holy conferencing” session at our annual conference. Annual conference delegates were mixed in small groups, with no one person from the same church in the same group. Clergy and lay were all mixed. The purpose of the holy conferencing was to share honest opinions regarding human sexuality.

I was in a group where one of the group members shared her frustration. She wore a rainbow stole and was outspoken, saying, “I do not understand why some people do not accept LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters. God is love. We should love everybody. What part of the love don’t they understand? Why are they so stubborn and legalistic? Can anybody help me at least understand them?” Then everybody in the group looked at me. I was the only Korean American pastor in the group. Korean Americans have a diverse spectrum of opinions on this issue, but people believe that “all” Korean Americans are traditionalists. That belief is simply not true. However, I can say that I understand both progressive and traditionalist positions.

I told her this story: I am serving a congregation with many elderly citizens. When I walk with them, I have to slow down. If I walk at my natural pace, I would be walking alone, leaving many of my church members behind. They would shout out to me, “Wait for me, Pastor Lee!”

I have felt this way many times at our annual conference and general conference meetings. I can tell that we are all fast-walkers on some issues and slow-walkers on some issues. Our progressive brothers and sisters are walking faster when they talk about human sexuality. Our traditional brothers and sisters walk slowly when they talk about our LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters. We walk at different paces on this issue. This issue does not mean that progressive brothers and sisters are more progressive in all areas. On another issue, illegal immigration, suddenly some of the so-called progressive groups became defensive and did not want to allow undocumented foreigners to come to the USA. Some of them wanted to build a wall and not a bridge. Traditionalists are fast-walkers on evangelism, but progressives are slow-walkers there.

When we value unity, however, we need to slow down or speed up to walk with others at a different pace. We all know that God guides us toward full inclusion of all persons. We know the direction of this walk. However, it is the pace of the walk that matters. Sometimes, I want to say to my progressive brothers and sisters on this issue, “Wait for me, I am out of breath!”

When I told my story, she opened her eyes widely and smiled. “You are the first person who makes me understand why they are so stubborn! They are out of breath! I walked too fast for you! I am sorry. But can you speed up?” We all laughed.

After the holy conferencing session, I thought about the Exodus walk. I read Exodus and Numbers and wondered how the Israelites could walk in the wilderness together. When I read the Bible, I found that God had to stop the walk many times so that the slow walkers could catch up and continue the journey with fast walkers. The pillars of fire and cloud sometimes stayed for many months. In this way, they were able to walk together for forty years in the

wilderness. That example has been our journey together in The United Methodist Church for the last several decades; now we have come to the point of decision making. We have arrived at the Jordan River, figuratively speaking.

Recently, UMC leaders met and proposed a [Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#). This idea was expressed in the 2019 General Conference as a “Gracious Exit.” Now, they have modified it and signed the protocol in order to walk at their own pace. This protocol does not mean that either our traditionalist or progressive brothers and sisters will stop their journey. It simply means that we walk at different paces, but we will walk together until the end as one body.

When the Israelites arrived at the lands of Jazer and Gilead, the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh decided to stay there. Moses was angry at them first, thinking that they did not want to be a part of the journey and that they wanted to discourage the whole nation. However, when Moses found out that those two and half tribes were still willing to journey together until the end, Moses allowed them their territory on that side of the Jordan. (Numbers 32)

I interpret the Finance Agreement suggested by the protocol as liken to the agreement between Moses and the two and half tribes. The Methodist denomination pursuant to the protocol will use the money to vitalize new Methodist denominations. Whether we are on the east side of the Jordan or on the west side of the Jordan, we can still work together. The protocol allows ecumenical support between the post-separation UMC and the Methodist denomination pursuant to the protocol. Boards and agencies will be shared by Methodists of all expressions.

This protocol, a compromise, is one way we keep unity with diversity. If adopted, some groups will stay at in Gilead. Some groups will cross over the Jordan River and move to the land of Canaan. Different areas will be assigned to different groups for God’s mission and ministry. Everybody will have a difficult job to do. However, I am confident that we all can “make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world” in this new structure!

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Methodism's Future: A Filipino Perspective

Rudy Juan

For the past fifty-two years as a global united church and nearly three hundred years from the time John Wesley and his brother, Charles, first started organizing societies which grew and eventually came to be known as the Methodist movement, the Methodist Church has been on the leading edge of God's mission to the world. In Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia, and especially in the Philippines, one can find the Cross and Flame—a symbol not only of The United Methodist Church, but of people who bring Christ's love to those in need wherever they may be.

It has been over a hundred years since the arrival of American missionaries to the Philippine Islands. Since then, countless lives have been touched through a multitude of projects: schools, hospitals, orphanages, places of worship and sanctuaries, and various ministries ranging from jail visitations to feeding programs, community health projects to relief and rehabilitation missions, work with indigenous peoples to involvement in justice and peace causes, and the equipping and sending of missionaries and fellows. The mission is never done for people called United Methodists.

Methodism was one of the first branches of Protestantism that set foot in the country, courtesy of American Methodist missionaries who arrived with the American military forces at the height of the outbreak of the Philippine–American War in 1898. Their Chaplain George Stull preached at the first Protestant service on August 28, 1898 with American soldiers and some Filipinos in attendance.

While there are those who say that the missionaries were also instrumental in pacifying the anti-occupation sentiments of Filipinos, nobody can argue the fact that they were also instruments of hope for those suffering from the ravages of war and destruction. Methodism was instrumental in supporting the efforts for postwar relief, reconstruction, and development.

And as one of the leading Protestant denominations in the country, The UMC has a profound impact. Some of its contributions to our heritage came through ushering the Philippines into a new era with the introduction of preschool education in the country through the Harris Memorial College; public medical services by a private medical institution which eventually became the Mary Johnston Hospital; pioneering work in legal education through the efforts of Dean Jorge Bocobo, a Methodist Lay Leader who started at the YMCA and eventually transferred to the University of the Philippines; the first student center and first women's dormitory, the Hugh Wilson Hall, through the Kapatiran Kaunlaran Foundation, Inc., and many more.

This is our legacy, and this is our contribution in *Missio Dei*: We are making disciples who can help transform the world so God's kingdom can be experienced more widely, here and now. As mandated in the Great Commission of our Risen Christ: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, CEB). And we do this effectively because we are a global church.

The challenge that our beloved church faces at this historical juncture is critical to our ability to be in mission as a church to the farthest reaches of our “Parish,” to those that have not yet heard or experienced the presence of Christ in their lives. And while we, as a global church, have experienced splits and separations in the past, these have never been done with significant consideration for or from conferences outside the United States. We must place the challenge of our church in its proper perspective so that all the members of the body can be appreciated for their gifts and graces, no matter how secondary or insignificant these may seem.

Must we, therefore, sacrifice the efficacy of our global reach to minister to the “least and lost” because we fail to be more open to the healing, loving, and reconciling work of the Holy Spirit in us? Both the Apostle Paul and our founder, John Wesley, urged us to be more humble, act more lovingly, and strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit that is in us.

We in the Philippines still have a rather fresh experience of the pain and confusion when, not so long ago, misunderstanding and rigidity led us to quickly part ways. Pitiful were those whom were victimized by the sudden turn of events: those whose relationships were unfortunately broken or suffered due to lack of options that could have preserved them, those who could have been at the receiving end of more effective ministries, and those who were affected by the “negative” witness they saw and heard from the people who usually ministered to them. It is my earnest prayer that we as a global church do not experience this. Not ever, by God’s grace!

So what, ideally, should the future of United Methodism look like from the perspective of the churches in the Philippines?

First, we should still be a united church. Especially because of our diversity, we must be united. Our diversity will provide the necessary “mixture” and “contrast” to make our continuing participation in God’s mission more meaningful and significant. This will require that we all be more open to engagements and relationships that can be mutually enlightening and empowering. Our unity will likewise strengthen our global reach, enabling our united church to continue ministering to our Parish.

Unfortunately, this first element will necessitate that we oppose any moves toward disuniting.

Second, United Methodism should support and embody the various contexts from where the churches originate. This should be manifested in our polity. Thus, instead of making the rest of the connection suffer from dissolution or splitting, the US church should restructure itself into a regional conference that will be the counterpart of central conferences. This will provide our American brothers and sisters the necessary structural mechanism by which they can consider in holy conferencing concerns that are centrally theirs. By doing so, others in the connection that do not hold any contextual stake on the issue/s being considered do not get unnecessarily involved. Part of this second element is the initiative to have a contextualized *Book of Discipline*.

Central conferences, on the other hand, should be able to opt to become affiliated as autonomous so that they can grow from partnerships and relationships emanating outside the main connection. This can further strengthen their capacity to be in ministry with people in need within their various areas.

Third, we must view this as an opportunity from our Most Gracious and Loving Creator to revisit how we conduct ourselves. Almost all central conferences have signified their intention and deep conviction to continue as a global church, reminding ourselves of the Quadrennial Theme years back: "Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors!"

Unfortunately, contrary to this view are most proposals originating from US churches which push for the disuniting of our beloved church, including a new proposal that already suggests how resources can be shared and distributed. This move by some of our American brothers and sisters may be interpreted by many as perpetuating the relegation of central conferences (and their representatives) to being mere voters in a legislative tug-of-war and not real stakeholders to the life, witness, and mission of our church.

This, therefore, becomes an opportune time to prayerfully reflect, dialogue, and if necessary, recast our ministering together as a family in a global church. Borrowing from the words of Rev. Dr. Lloyd T. Nyarota of the Zimbabwe East Annual Conference when he represented the Forum of Concerned Central Conference United Methodists during the Philippines Central Conference Coordinating Council Meeting in October 2019: "We are convinced that we have a lot more to accomplish as United Methodists coming together despite our differences. Our witness and mission is bold and effective when we stand United, and we believe it is still possible for us to continue as a global denomination."

Amidst the challenges in our church and in the world—our Parish, we must continue to be a global movement of Christians open and sensitive to God's work in us, committed to discipling believers, intent on mission that cultivates our common faith, and engaged in action for social justice and transformation, whether at home or abroad.

I honestly do not know, nor can I forecast, what will transpire during GC2020. I also do not want to offer even an educated guess. What is next for The United Methodist Church is not clear to anyone, despite what you may have already heard or read. With the recent [Protocol](#) being proposed to the General Conference, Filipino Methodists will act on the basis of their contextual authority as a Central Conference. An outcome will only be determined come May 5-15. We should earnestly pray for whatever revelation our Gracious Creator will let us experience during that time. Let us rest in the promise that all things will work together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28).

But what I truly believe is this: All is far from over and our Miraculous God is not yet through with us. God still requires the church for mission because “The harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers” (Luke 10:2). God is not yet finished molding The United Methodist Church; neither is God about to stop doing what God does best—spreading love, pouring out grace, and providing hope to a broken world in need of mending, reconciling, and healing.

May our Loving God continue to be with us in our journey ahead as a united global church. God bless us all.

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Who Will We Choose to Be?

Cynthia Fierro Harvey

Many have said that we are in untenable times. Perhaps it has never been so true. Yet, I have asked myself more than once, “How did we get here?”

In a recent meeting a similar question was asked, and someone turned to the prophet Haggai. You could tell by the looks on the faces of those around the table that many did not know who Haggai was nor did they know Haggai was actually a book in the Bible. To be fair, it is an obscure and short text that is hard to find; most people probably have to look it up in the Table of Contents of their favorite Bible to locate it. Just two short chapters sandwiched between Zephaniah and Zechariah, it’s easy to miss.

It is around 520 BCE. It has been better than fifty years and the temple is not yet rebuilt. I am certain that some who began the journey were no longer alive, others had little memory of the events of the past or had to rely on the memory of others. Many notables had been involved: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others and still the temple remained a pile of rubble. (Sound familiar?) Like many of us today, those in Haggai’s time were probably asking, “How did we get here?”

The late [Timothy F. Simpson wrote](#), “As it was with Haggai, the real test of leadership is not necessarily the capacity to motivate people to action, but rather to keep them fixed on the same goal when it becomes clear that the rhetoric that moved them in the first place bears little resemblance to the actual situation in which they have to act.”¹

Perhaps our current situation is untenable because we have forgotten how we got here. The situation in which we have to act bears little resemblance to what got us here in the first place. We have forgotten what is at stake should The United Methodist Church divide, dissolve or splinter.

We have forgotten that which has shaped us. We are filled with communities that have been and continue to be enriched day after day by spiritual awakening and warmed hearts. We have experienced firsthand prevenient grace that accompanies us as we move on to perfection.

We have been shaped by our history of justice and mercy. We must never forget the fight for the ordination of women. The impact countless servants have had in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS has been heroic. Remember [Nothing But Nets](#)? [Imagine No Malaria](#)? The creation of [The Advance](#)? The [sending of missionaries](#) from everywhere to everywhere? The establishment of [Africa University](#)?

¹ Timothy F. Simpson, “The Politics of Managing Expectations: Haggai 1:15b-2:9, politicaltheology.com, Nov. 4, 2013. <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-managing-expectations-haggai-115b-29/>

We have forgotten who we are and what has shaped and formed us into the people we are called to be. The mission of the church, to make disciples for the transformation of the world, has been lost in the rhetoric, in the creation of plans, in the conversations, mediations and back room deal-making. We have lost a sense of who we are and who we are called to be.

Many current plans and proposals set to appear at General Conference 2020 call for separation, disaffiliation and dissolution by different names. These plans call for the division of assets like we would deal cards at last week's Bridge Club or a kid's version of Go Fish. All the while, we continue to cause harm to one another and to ourselves. We continue to alienate the most vulnerable, the very ones who need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our churches in the United States continue to decline in worship attendance, in giving, and in vitality. We have forgotten that it has never been about our buildings or the size and influence of our denomination — it has been about the presence of God in our midst. It is our call to proclaim the Good News and bring people to Jesus.

When we don't know where we are, where we are going, or what to do, we default to what we know. While no fault of their own, small groups of faithful followers of Jesus are defaulting to what we have always known, writing legislation in hopes that they might have the answer to the best way forward for twelve million United Methodists.

As we enter into General Conference 2020, it is important for delegates to remember that the proposals addressing our impasse on human sexuality are but a handful of hundreds of pieces of legislation that will be before the General Conference. I continue to remind delegates, especially new delegates, that this is not a single issue General Conference.

It is also important to note that the plans many of us have studied and are familiar with are not likely to be in the same shape or form once they survive the legislative committee process.

I pray each day that there will be legislation that stops the harm, that furthers our mission and multiplies the United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible. Maybe that's too much to ask, but I was consecrated to uphold the unity of the Church and I still hold onto every shred of possibility that unity, as I know it, could occur. But I am not naïve enough to believe that we will all leave Minneapolis and head home happy campers. Some will find the current situation untenable and irreconcilable and will leave the denomination we all love. Can we bless and send one another as we find ways to maintain relationships for missional purposes without devouring one another in the process?

Can we avoid raiding the closets and bank accounts of the boards and agencies who provide support and serve so many — particularly ethnic-minority ministries and the educational, global missional, and daily ministry efforts focused on the most vulnerable communities?

Imagine an action of the General Conference that will stop the harm to our LGBTQ siblings! If we believe we are made in the image of God, how can we possibly say that any of us are incompatible with Christian teaching? Many generations have passed through our doors since the "incompatibility" language was added in 1972. Many more will be called, formed, and sent for Christian ministry in the years to come. Elimination of the incompatibility language is the first step toward restoring our gospel call to love our neighbor in its greatest fullness.

Our tradition has continually been reformed and reshaped as we have taken seriously the contexts in which we preach, teach, and work for justice and mercy. In several regions United Methodists live under civil laws that make it illegal to discriminate against LGBTQ siblings, and yet the church has not reached agreement to make the same commitments. Jesus crossed cultural and religious norms of his time many times. I am a believer who stands on the firm foundation of a Jesus who extended the table in a way that still transcends and upends our norms today. I believe as faithful followers of Jesus that we can live — are indeed called to live — in our differences. I also firmly believe it is difficult and virtually impossible to legislate matters of the heart, leaving us to default to what we know: reliance on rules and structures.

Who will we choose to be?

The General Conference could take action that furthers the mission and advances the nature of Jesus in our midst — loving God, loving neighbor. Unfortunately, it takes many words before the words *Jesus* or *discipleship* are even mentioned in many of the current proposals.

How did we get here? Have we forgotten who we are?

Have we forgotten The Nature of Our Theological Task?

It is both critical and constructive.
It is both individual and communal.
It is contextual and incarnational.
It is essentially practical.

Our task is the ongoing effort to live as Christians in the midst of the complexities of a secular world.

In the final paragraphs of the conclusion of the Theological Task we read:

In this spirit we take up our theological task. We endeavor through the power of the Holy Spirit to understand the love of God given in Jesus Christ. We seek to spread this love abroad. As we see more clearly who we have been, as we understand more fully the needs of the world, as we draw more effectively upon our theological heritage, we will become better equipped to fulfill our calling as the people of God. (BOD, pg. 91)

What is our calling as the people of God?

It is time we decide what matters and settle it in our heart. Who will we choose to be?

Imagine action that will allow us time and space to manage change so as not to crumble that which took the investment of generations to create. While I might be accused of being focused on institutional preservation, the reality is that some institutional preservation is needed. What remains of The United Methodist Church might be smaller; that might be necessary and a good and joyful thing because smaller organizations are more nimble and can be more responsive.

I am not sure what we are afraid of, but I am certainly not afraid to let go of that which stands between our future as United Methodists and unity, between us and loving our neighbor in the

broadest sense of the word. I still believe we are capable of reaching people for Jesus Christ in a way that changes the world.

“Do not be afraid” appears over three hundred times in the Bible and Jesus used the phrase over seventy times.

What are we afraid of that cannot be overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Have we forgotten who we are?

Back to Haggai for a moment: “My spirit abides among you; do not fear. Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:5-9, NRSV).

Is it possible that the actions of the General Conference 2020 could build a church, a United Methodist Church, that shall be greater than the former? I say *yes, for things are possible with God.*

But first, we must answer: Who will we choose to be?

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The Future of Methodism Is Not Methodism

Edgardo Colón-Emeric

I first learned of the [“Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation”](#) from one of my sons who showed me a Washington Post news story titled [“United Methodist church is expected to split over gay marriage.”](#) My immediate reaction was surprise. The diversity of the signatories committing themselves to the process outlined in the agreement was unexpected. I was also surprised by the amount of media attention that the release of the Protocol garnered. True, the media outlets got ahead of the story and mischaracterized the Protocol as a done deal. At the same time, the clarity of its proposals and the weight of its endorsers make a split seem more imminent and questions about a future for (or beyond) The United Methodist Church more pressing.

Is there a future for Methodism? Wesley had his doubts. Five years before his death, in his “Thoughts upon Methodism” he famously said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect having the form of religion without the power.”¹ In his 1789 sermon “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity” he wonders, “What a mystery is this! That Christianity should have done so little good in the world!”²

Wesley is exaggerating. I believe that Methodism has done much good in the world. Still, how do we account for its proneness to church splits and cultural accommodation? When the first ecumenical Methodist conference met in London in 1881, there were ten separate denominations in attendance from the United Kingdom and eighteen from the United States. John Wesley’s perplexity finds an echo in Ricardo Arjona’s lament, “*Jesús es verbo, no sustantivo*” (“Jesus is a verb, not a noun”)³ that in this world there are more denominations than happy children.

The future for Methodism envisioned by the Protocol is predicated on a tragic separation. Separation is presented as “the best means to resolve our differences, allowing each part of the Church to remain true to its theological understanding, while recognizing the dignity, equality, integrity, and respect of every person.”⁴ Restructuring toward separation is “a faithful step with the possibility of continued cooperation around matters of shared interest, enabling each of us to authentically live out our faith.”⁵ The step may well be legitimate; the lesser evil, a “respectful and dignified separation” is preferable to the greater evil of doing harm to fellow United Methodists and impeding The United Methodist Church in its mission to the world. And yet, I am mindful of

¹ John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Methodism” in [The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design](#), ed. Rupert E. Davies, vol. 9 of [The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 527.

² John Wesley, “The Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity” in [Sermons IV: 115-151](#), ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 4 of [The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 87.

³ Ricardo Arjona, “Jesús, verbo no sustantivo,” *Jesús, Verbo No Sustantivo* (Sony Music, 1988).

⁴ *Protocol*, Statement of Principles, Paragraph G.

⁵ *Protocol*, Statement of Principles, Paragraph H.

Hannah Arendt's warning, "those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil."⁶ Are we doomed to choosing between evils?

I am neither a forecaster nor a gambling man. I do not know what will happen at General Conference 2020 nor do I have a sense of the odds for this Protocol. I am, for better or worse, a theologian. Thus, when I think of the future of Methodism, I begin not with General Conference but with the end. John Wesley believed that God raised the Methodist people "not to form any sect, but to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land."⁷ Holy love is the end of Methodism. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are a reform, renewal, and revival movement that makes disciples of Jesus Christ (not simply disciples of John Wesley) for the transformation of the world (not simply for congregational growth). We Methodists are most ourselves when we live backwards, when we live from the end.

In T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* the character of Merlyn is a somewhat confused and confusing person. He has a hard time living in the world because he lives backwards. As he explains to young Arthur, "Now ordinary people are born forwards in time...But I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a whole lot of people living forwards from behind."⁸ I believe that this is the vocation that Methodists are being called to embrace again. Our present moment calls for us to interpret our history from the end, to lament the current state of Methodism from the hope that God is still with us, to contemplate the Golgotha of separation from the future of reconciliation and the reality of grace. We are called to live backwards from the end because our "life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). What does this mean? It means that the "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" is best backwards from the end.

Read from the end, the earmarking of funds to "to strengthen ministries by and for Asian, Black, Hispanic-Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander Communities"⁹ is a sign that the future of Methodism in the United States needs to resemble more the demographic diversity of the nation. The days of monoculturalism are numbered. This is not an issue of celebrating diversity but of announcing and anticipating the kingdom of God where "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all" (Col 3:11)!

Read from the end, the charge to the Council of United Methodist Bishops "to enter into ecumenical agreements with Methodist denominations formed under this Protocol"¹⁰ is more than a sensible, just sharing of assets. The word "ecumenical" means more than interdenominational cooperation. At the root of all "ecumenical agreements" worth their

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 36.

⁷ *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), Vol.8, p.299, *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others*.

⁸ T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: Ace Books, 2011), 22.

⁹ *Protocol*, Article IV, Paragraph C, Item iii.

¹⁰ *Protocol*, Article IV, Paragraph C, Item v.

name is the groaning of the people of God for the fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus Christ “that they may be one...so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21).

Is there a future for Methodism? Yes! But the future of Methodism is not Methodism. When read from the end, the future is “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). When read from the end, the future is cosmic symphony because through Christ “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). When read from the end, the future of Methodism is, Wesley says, the new creation where “there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!”¹¹ Read from the end, the Protocol is but one possible outline for a scene in the story of the people called Methodist, which is but a chapter in the divine comedy of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.

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¹¹ John Wesley, “The New Creation” in [Sermons II: 34-70, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 4 of The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 510.

COMPARISON OF PROPOSALS TO GENERAL CONFERENCE 2020

This summary compares proposals from various groups, in alphabetical order, about the structure of The UMC. It does not include proposals from individuals. Further details are in the documents and legislation. All proposals will be open for amendments at General Conference and may be subject to Judicial Council review. Updated on 1/7/20.

PLANS	"NEW DENOMINATIONS OF UNITED METHODISM" (INDIANAPOLIS PLAN) (MULTIPLE CONTRIBUTORS)	"NEW EXPRESSIONS WORLDWIDE" (UMFORWARD)	"NEXT GENERATION UMC" (UMCNEXT)	"PROTOCOL OF RECONCILIATION & GRACE THROUGH SEPARATION" (MULTIPLE CONTRIBUTORS)	"U.S. REGIONAL CONFERENCE" (CONNECTONAL TABLE)
PLAN DOCUMENTS	https://indyplan.umc.org/	https://um-forward.org/the-new-plan	https://umcnext.com/legislation/	Protocol FAQs	https://www.umc.org/en/content/connectional-table-us-regional-conference-legislation-now-available
NUMBER OF DENOMINATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-3 or more global denominations - traditionalist and centrist/progressive • The UMC continues through the Centrist UMC. • Other denominations may be formed by 50+ local churches or an annual conference(s). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 global denominations - traditionalist, moderate, progressive and liberationist • The UMC dissolves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 or more - The UMC remains intact with options for new Methodist denominations that continue in relationship with the UMC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 or more • A new traditionalist denomination is formed and others may also be formed. • The UMC continues after separation. 	<p>KEY POINTS: This proposal relates to U.S. structure. It does not address LGBTQ related matters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UMC remains intact with a new regional structure for the U.S. • Does not call for a major restructuring of the UMC.
WHO DECIDES WHAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual and central conferences, by simple majority, choose to join any new denomination. • Clergy and bishops choose to join any new denomination. • Central conferences may become autonomous. • Local churches, by simple majority, may choose a different denomination than their annual conference and retain property, assets and liabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A transitional council develops a plan of separation. • Annual conferences, central conferences, clergy and bishops choose to join any new denomination. • Local churches, by 2/3 majority, may choose a different denomination than their annual conference and retain property, assets and liabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Congregations, clergy and conferences determine affiliations. • Local churches, by 2/3 majority, may choose to separate from the UMC and retain property, assets and liabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual conferences, by 57% majority, may vote to join a new Methodist denomination. • Central conferences, by 2/3 majority, may vote to join a new Methodist denomination. • Local churches, by either a simple or 2/3 majority, may choose a different denomination than that of their annual conference and retain property, assets and liabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Until a U.S. regional conference is formed, an interim committee of the General Conference handles U.S. matters.

<p>PLANS</p>	<p>“NEW DENOMINATIONS” (INDIANAPOLIS PLAN)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sets interim exemption from LGBTQ prohibitions for Centrist conferences, churches and clergy. • Sets interim suspension of complaints and disciplinary actions related to LGBTQ bans for Centrist conferences, churches and clergy. • Mandatory retirement for U.S. bishops waived until 2022. • U.S. bishop elections may be postponed until 2021 or 2022. 	<p>“NEW EXPRESSIONS WORLDWIDE”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes an immediate moratorium on charges, complaints and trials related to LGBTQ prohibitions. • Does not indicate constitutional amendments. 	<p>“NEXT GENERATION UMC”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes LGBTQ prohibitions and Traditional Plan additions. • A moratorium on new or pending complaint proceedings and trials related to LGBTQ prohibitions takes effect at the close of General Conference 2020. • The special called General Conference makes constitutional amendments or adopts a new constitution proposed by the special commission. 	<p>“PROTOCOL OF RECONCILIATION & GRACE THROUGH SEPARATION”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register intent to form a new Methodist denomination by May 15, 2021. • Requests holding in abeyance all administrative or judicial processes related to LGBTQ prohibitions and some church closures. • Local churches affiliating with a new denomination must maintain connective responsibilities until separation. • ¶2553 applies to disaffiliating churches that do not join a new Methodist denomination. • Provisions are not severable. If any provisions are deemed unconstitutional by the Judicial Council or legal by civil courts, the entire protocol will be null and void. 	<p>FINANCES/ ASSET DIVISION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuation of clergy pensions through each new denomination. • Apportionments paid by all denominations through 2020. • All denominations support funding for central conference ministries through 2024. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General church assets divided equitably. • Provides for arbitration. • Establishes financial investments in historically marginalized and vulnerable churches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Conference includes grant funding for new denominations in relationship with The UMC in the 2021-2024 budget. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$25M over four years is paid to a new traditionalist denomination with no further claims to United Methodist assets. • \$2M is escrowed for other possible new denominations. • \$39M is allocated over eight years to support ethnic ministries and Africa University. • Property, assets, and liabilities of annual, jurisdictional, and central conferences are retained by those entities regardless of affiliation. • Pension plans for all current clergy and lay employees remain in place, regardless of affiliation. 	<p>“U.S. REGIONAL CONFERENCE”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires constitutional amendments (2/3 majority vote by General Conference and annual conference members). • Amends Part VI, Chapter Four, of the Discipline to authorize and organize a U.S. regional conference.
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PLANS	<p>"NEW DENOMINATIONS" (INDIANAPOLIS PLAN)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All denominations develop their own structures, polity and governance. Wespath, UMCOR, UMW, UM Men, UMPH become independent to serve any denomination. Archives and History retains assets and liabilities and financially supported by each denomination. All other agencies become part of the Centrist UMC with the option to serve other denominations. 	<p>"NEW EXPRESSIONS WORLDWIDE"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New denominations determine their own policies, structure and processes. General agencies become independent 501(c)3 organizations. 	<p>"NEXT GENERATION UMC"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates a U.S. regional conference and a U.S. Regional Committee of the General Conference. A special commission proposes a new constitution and governance structures. 	<p>"PROTOCOL OF RECONCILIATION & GRACE THROUGH SEPARATION"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The UMC and new denominations may enter into ecumenical agreements and participation in agencies or mission activities. 	<p>"U.S. REGIONAL CONFERENCE"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Stage I) Creates an interim U.S. regional committee of the General Conference to handle U.S. matters. (Stage II) Creates a U.S. regional conference comprising the current jurisdictions, which continue with the same powers and geographic areas.
<p>STRUCTURE AND AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jurisdictional or annual conference institutions may change affiliation or become independent. 				
<p>TIMELINE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective at the close of General Conference 2020. Aug. 1, 2020 - Interim new alignment begins. Jan. 1, 2021 - Default alignment with Centrist UMC if no choice made by an annual conference. Mar. 31, 2021 - Default alignment with Traditional UMC if no choice made by a central conference. Fall 2021 - Inaugural General Conferences held. Jan. 1, 2022 - New denominations fully established. 2028 - Opportunity to choose a denomination remains open. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective at the close of General Conference 2020. Prior to 2024 - Special General Conference held to approve a plan of separation. Transition time for local churches extends until the Special General Conference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug. 1, 2020 - Commission on a 21st Century Church begins work. Fall 2023 - Special General Conference meets. 2025 - Local church disaffiliation provisions expire. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TBD - UMC Special General Conference to create regional conferences. TBD - U.S. regional conference meets to address Book of Discipline changes. May 15, 2021 - Deadline to register intent to form a new Methodist denomination. July 1, 2021 - Annual conference deadline to vote to affiliate with a new denomination. Dec 31, 2021 - Central conference deadline to vote to affiliate with a new denomination. Dec 31, 2024 - Local church deadline to vote to affiliate with a different denomination than their annual conference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2021-2024 - Interim committee plans a new U.S. Regional Conference. 2024 - New U.S. Regional Conference convenes.