A newsletter for United Methodists working for Scripture-based reform in our denomination.

UMAction Briefing

November 2019

UM Schools Embrace Islam, Unitarian Universalism

Roughly 100 colleges and universities across America are affiliated with the United Methodist Church, yet the dominant pattern has been for them to have little more Christian character than any secular college. Sometimes they even display overt hostility to historic, biblical Christian faith.

In September, the Student Government Senate of UMC-affiliated **Duke University** in Durham, North Carolina, denied recognition to a chapter of the evangelical youth ministry, Young Life, while recognizing the Sikh Society. Both votes were unanimous. Young Life was rejected for expecting its mentors for middle and high school youth to abstain from any sex outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Presumably, the Sikh Society expects its leaders to adhere to teachings of the Sikh religion.

In August, UMC-affiliated **Shenandoah University** in Winchester, Virginia, hired its first-ever non-Christian chaplain, **Hanaa Unus.** As Muslim Community Coordinator she "work[s] with both Muslim and non-Muslim students to address their spiritual care and needs," with spiritual guidance evidently coming from an Islamic rather than Christian perspective. Unus joins a small Office of Spiritual Life staff that includes at least two United Methodist liberal caucus activists: a partnered lesbian "ordained" by the schismatic Church Within A Church Movement and an outspoken General Conference delegate who discontinued his own ordination candidacy in public protest of the February 2019 General Conference's adopting the Traditional Plan.

In August, UMC-affiliated Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, hired its first-ever non-Christian chaplain, Hanaa Unus.

Perhaps most harmfully, in July, UMC-affiliated **Emory University** in Atlanta chose a Unitarian Universalist minister, **Gregory McGonigle,** as dean of spiritual and religious life. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in which McGonigle is ordained is historically rooted in movements that reject biblical teaching about salvation and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Today the UUA is a radically post-Christian, relativist religion, which seeks to treat all religious traditions as equally valid and includes different factions of members who identify as atheist, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, "Earth-centered," or Hindu. Under Unitarian Universalist leadership, we cannot expect Christian evangelism and discipleship to be top priorities of Emory's Office of Spiritual and Religious Life.

See UM Schools Embrace Islam, Unitarian Universalism, *page 6*

Inside:

Student members of the Duke University chapter of Young Life requested official recognition in September so that they could hold on-campus meetings. The student senate took issue with the national organization's policy denying leadership positions to individuals who do not live by its sexual morality standards. (Photo: Mary Helen Wood/*The Chronicle*)

Several Liberal Congregations Move towards Leaving UMC

This September, at least eleven liberal United Methodist congregations in five states took initial steps towards leaving the United Methodist Church in protest of our denomination's traditionalist biblical policies on sexual morality. Eight of these eleven congregations are formally affiliated with the LGBTQ-liberationist Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN).

Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church in Savannah, Georgia

Members of Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church in Savannah, Georgia, voted by a whopping 309–7 to disaffiliate from the UMC. This was a very deliberate decision, made at a formal meeting presided over by the district superintendent, and preceded by members being informed through the church newsletter as well as "informational sessions" and "discussion group opportunities" about the options, including how quitting the UMC would require the congregation to pay $280,000 for its share of the unfunded liability of our denomination's clergy pension program. (It is possible that the 2020 General Conference may change church law to allow such congregations to leave on more generous terms.) Asbury Memorial's pastor, **Billy Hester,** told his flock before the vote, "It became clear at the 2019 General Conference that due to the large number of delegates from overseas," deleting the UMC's official disapproval of homosexual practice "will not happen as the denomination exists presently," and that, "I cannot in good conscience continue pastoring in a denomination" with such a biblical stance.

Then the church council of Central United Methodist Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina, reportedly issued a declaration that "If **great progress** is not made in eliminating hurtful language toward LGBTQ+ people and if the United Methodist Church doesn't move **dramatically** toward more inclusion of LGBTQ+ people at General Conference 2020, the Church Council of Central United Methodist Church will recommend that the congregation vote to 'disaffiliate' with the U.M.C." (emphases added). Central's pastor, **Tom Norrell,** observed among some fellow liberals "a feeling of urgency that if the United Methodist Church doesn't make progress, a lot of the progressives are going to be leaving as institutions or individuals."

Then nine congregations in Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut jointly announced that they have begun discerning whether or not to leave, based on having decided "that their understanding of human sexuality and God's inclusive love is in direct and potentially irreconcilable conflict with the policies and practices of The United Methodist Church." They have already proclaimed loyalty to the "Loved and Liberated" of the liberal UM Forward caucus, which describes as "non-negotiable" having a denomination with no protected space for clergy and congregations who are not affirming of homosexual practices. A spokesman for the New England Nine said that they were coming to see that "we might have irreconcilable differences and it's time to go." They might have been joined by additional congregations if the New England Conference had not recently adopted a heavy-handed new policy to make it much harder for congregations to leave.

None of these congregations will be finalizing any departure before spring. Other liberal congregations are likely undergoing similar deliberations. The aforementioned UM Forward caucus is now seeking to find and connect with liberal congregations on their way out.

UM*Action* wants our congregations to compassionately welcome ALL people, including self-described members of the LGBTQ community, to the transformative grace, gracious community, and Christian discipleship God offers. But if a congregation's leaders and members adamantly refuse to listen to biblical teachings or to respect our denomination's rules, we see little value in trying to force such people to remain United Methodist against their will.

FOR REFLECTION: ***Amos 3:3.***

Giving Drying Up in Desert Southwest

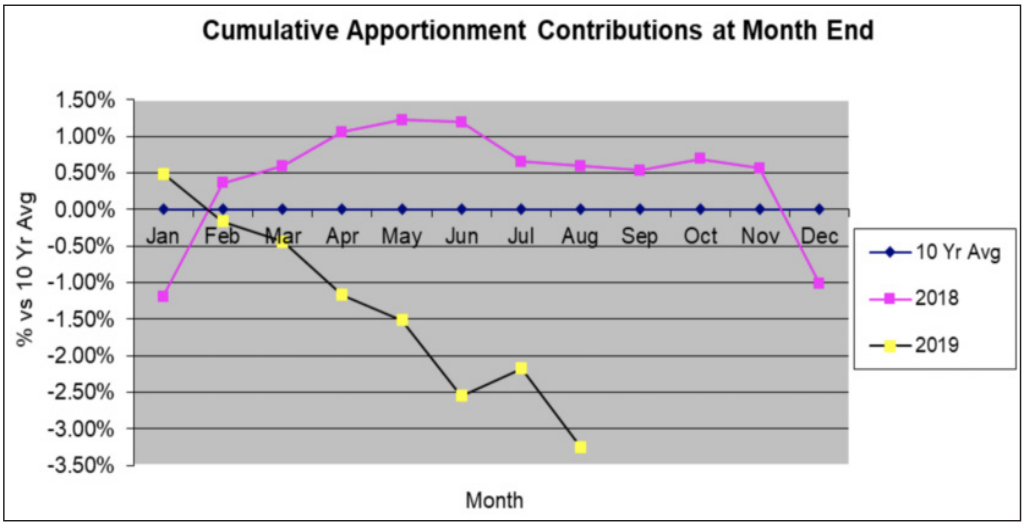


Chart courtesy of the Desert Southwest Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church

Membership decline combined with denominational discontent has brought the Desert Southwest Annual Conference (DSC) of the United Methodist Church to a precarious financial situation.

Encompassing Arizona and southern Nevada, the DSC's mission field includes some of the fastest-growing population areas in the U.S. But the aggressive theological radicalism of its leadership—which has repeatedly passed resolutions denouncing IRD / UM*Action* (most recently during a special session in September)—has not proven attractive to congregants. The DSC has been one of the fastest-shrinking conferences in church membership.

In April, Bishop **Robert Hoshibata** and the Chairperson of the DSC Council on Finance and Administration publicly urged continued payment of apportionments, stressing that 82 percent of these denominational skimmings from offering plates stays within the annual conference. Liberals as well as traditionalists have been increasingly inclined towards withholding their apportionment payments in frustration with our denomination.

Apparently, that April appeal was not enough. In September, conference treasurer **Randy Bowman** projected that the DSC was on track to pay just 80 percent of the apportionments it owed, "the worst year by far in our Conference's history."

Though the conference has some reserve funds, DSC officials have already enacted spending cuts. These include deciding to pay only 80 percent of their assigned share of general church apportionments (which refers to the global, denomination-wide funding streams all congregations are required to support), cutting additional funding the conference has given to the radical Claremont School of Theology (which has already been financially struggling) by 25 percent, not hiring any new conference staff (even when positions "come open through retirement or attrition"), and slashing Equitable Compensation subsidies by 30 percent.

This last cut does not seem sustainable. These are funds provided through the annual conference to pastors whose congregations are unable to pay them the full amount of an equitable minimum salary. Small congregations that are already struggling to pay their pastors may find themselves in even tougher situations, which could lead to such churches deciding to reduce their own apportionment payments, worsening the overall problem. Furthermore, pastors are less likely to seek or continue in appointments if they cannot be assured of an honest salary.

Even before its present crunch, this conference could not afford to independently pay for its own bishop (who serves no other conference), relying on major subsidies from other U.S. annual conferences. Unlike most other U.S. annual conferences, the DSC has been contributing nothing to support central conference bishops overseas.

By choosing to target their general-church apportionments (which include the Episcopal Fund through which all bishops are supported) for steep cuts, the DSC is effectively demanding that United Methodists outside of the Western Jurisdiction pay even more to subsidize their extra bishop.

The relentless pursuit of liberal agendas, provocative disregard for our denomination's biblical standards, and harsh marginalization of traditionalist believers is not unique to this one annual conference, nor are the deep costs that come with such choices. For years, this has been characteristic of our denomination's entire Western Jurisdiction.

Interestingly, by the end of September, the DSC had actually paid a significantly *higher* percentage of its assigned 2019 share of general church apportionments than any other annual conference in the Western Jurisdiction.

We have previously reported how shortly after openly partnered lesbian activist **Karen Oliveto** was illegitimately elected bishop by the Western Jurisdiction in 2016, one of the annual conferences on which she was imposed—the already precarious Yellowstone Conference—faced what officials called a "financial crisis" and was forced to merge into a neighboring conference. Oliveto's status remains contested, but she has not been removed from office, yet.

Whatever may happen in the future, such deep divides between the global denomination, an annual conference, and people in the pews do not portend a sustainable way forward for anyone.

FOR REFLECTION: ***Psalm 127:1–2.***

Inching Away from UMC, Liberal Bishop Forms 'Guiding Coalition'

More liberal United Methodists in the Western Jurisdiction appear to be inching closer to some form of denominational separation. In October, Bishop **Elaine Stanovsky** of the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area announced the formation of a Guiding Coalition now working to "shape and lead a new movement of Methodism in the Northwest that fully includes LGBTQIA+ persons" and to "develop proposals for United Methodists across the Greater Northwest to move into a future of vital, inclusive, innovative, multiplying, engaged Christian ministry in the Wesleyan Tradition."

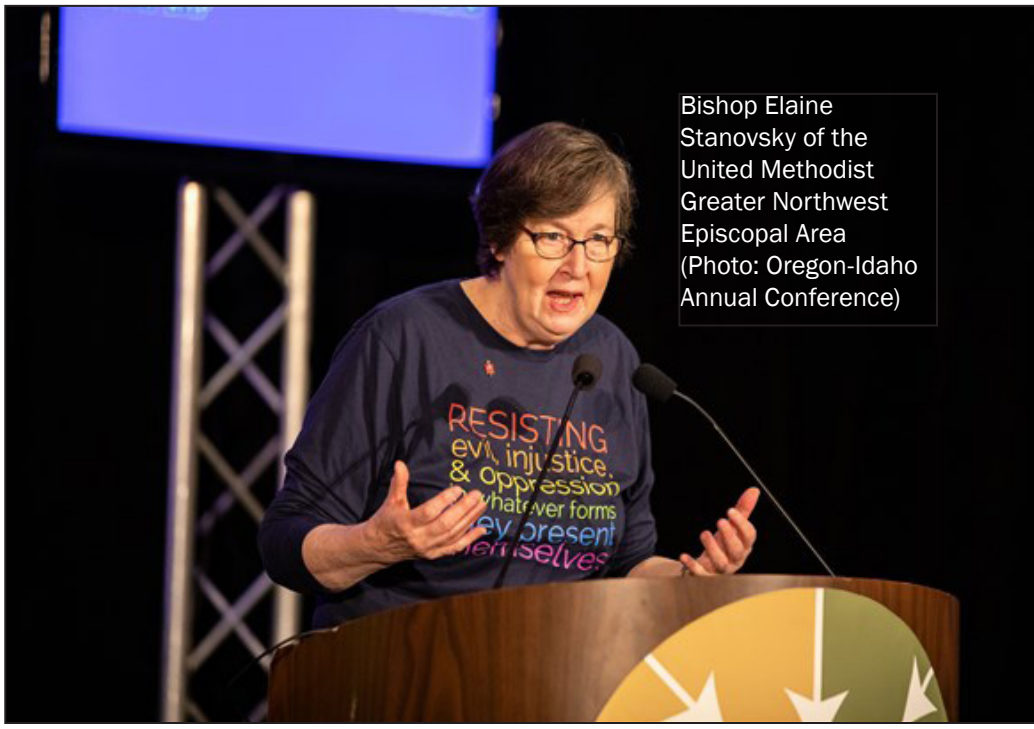
"We are forming this Guiding Coalition in response to many conversations since last February, and to legislation passed at the annual conference sessions earlier this year," Stanovsky shared, obliquely referencing the 2019 specially called General Conference that adopted a partial version of the Traditional Plan. That plan makes no fundamental changes to UMC moral standards, but enhances accountability for ministers who violate our denomination's bans on same-sex "sin blessing" ceremonies and on clergy being sexually active outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. This was a response to the way some bishops have been abusing loopholes in our governing UMC *Book of Discipline* to effectively allow clergy to violate biblical standards with impunity while still following some technical letters of the law. These new accountability measures, including the closing of such loopholes, take effect on January 1.

We have previously reported on how last spring, all seven annual conferences in this long radicalized jurisdiction adopted motions that in various ways explored possibilities for leaving the UMC. Officials in the Mountain Sky Area, led by **Karen Oliveto** (whose continued occupancy of the office of bishop remains in question), have already stated their intention to depart if the 2020 General Conference does not go as they wish.

Stanovsky's Guiding Coalition includes representatives from her three annual conferences: the Alaska, Oregon-Idaho, and Pacific-Northwest Conferences.

Different working groups are studying alternative paths. These include (1) continued resistance to the Traditional Plan and efforts to liberalize church law at future General Conferences, (2) aligning finances with the liberal values of UMC officials in that area (an apparent allusion to some liberal United Methodists' recent talk about using Americans' superior wealth as a weapon to defund and collectively punish more theologically conservative areas in Africa and Eastern Europe), **(3) "discern[ing] what a new expression of Methodism might look like if designed for 21st century people living in the Greater Northwest Area,"** and (4) preparing "for the potentially monumental decisions that may need to take place" at the joint session the three annual conferences will have together in June.

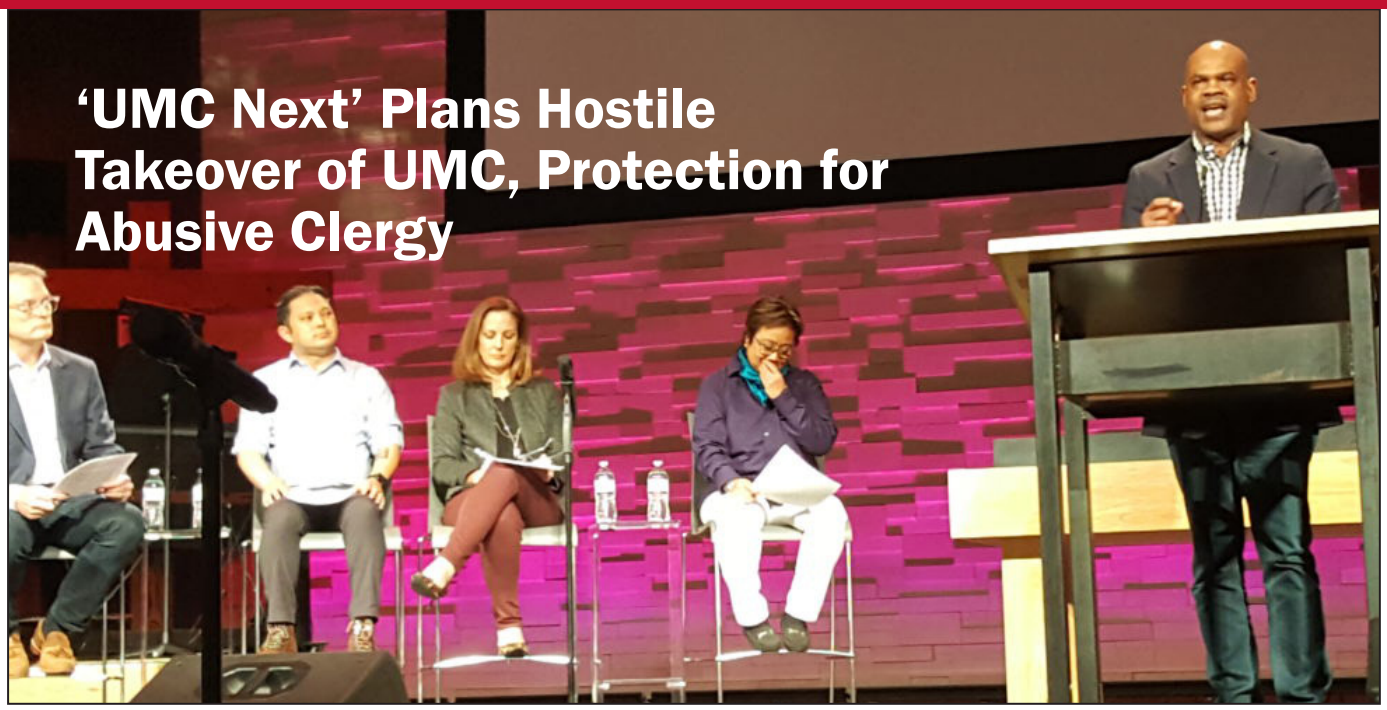
Leading up to the February 2019 General Conference, all Western Jurisdiction bishops publicly supported the misleadingly named "One Church Plan" (OCP), which would have liberalized our denomination's sexuality standards to a much greater extent than the liberal policies that split other mainline Protestant denominations, while purging traditional believers from key leadership positions. Since the 2019 General Conference's defeat of that proposal, Western Jurisdiction officials have defiantly spoken openly about acting within their area as if those proposed liberal policies had been enacted.



Bishop Elaine Stanovsky of the United Methodist Greater Northwest Episcopal Area (Photo: Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference)

ACTION: ***Please commit to praying regularly that the May 5-15, 2020 General Conference will move as much as possible of the current United Methodist Church forward on a new path of biblical faithfulness, effective accountability for our clergy, genuinely Christian compassion for all people, and renewed disciple-making effectiveness—and that there would be a gracious separation from many of those unwilling to honor our biblical standards, and who would undermine our church from within if we stayed together.***

‘UMC Next’ Plans Hostile Takeover of UMC, Protection for Abusive Clergy



The Rev. Junius Dodson (right), General Secretary of UM Discipleship Ministries, and five other UMC Next conveners appear at a press conference in May. Seated (from left) are: the Rev. Adam Hamilton, the Rev. DJ del Rosario, the Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli and Karen Prudente. (Photo: David Burke/Great Plains Conference)

A new unofficial liberal caucus group, UMC Next, has submitted a 33-page “UMC Next Generation” plan to our denomination’s May 2020 General Conference. This caucus’s Convening Team includes celebrity pastor **Adam Hamilton, Tom Berlin** (lead submitter of the misleadingly named “One Church Plan” to the 2019 General Conference), **Lonnie Chafin** (a deputy of Chicago Bishop **Sally Dyck** and a leading proponent of the recent “Way Forward” process), **Jan Lawrence** (CEO of the LGBTQ-liberationist Reconciling Ministries Network), **Randall Miller** (former head of RMN), Bishop **Sue Haupert-Johnson** of North Georgia, Bishop **Mike McKee** of North Texas, and **Junius Dotson** (CEO of our denomination’s official “Discipleship Ministries” agency).

Their plan includes these ingredients:

1. Dramatically liberalize church standards on homosexuality. UMC Next’s plan would comprehensively delete official church teachings and policies disapproving of homosexual practice. When their failed “One Church Plan” paid lip service to still including traditionalist believers who could not participate in same-sex union ceremonies or accept a homosexually partnered pastor, many questioned the sincerity of such assurances. Now leading proponents of the “One Church Plan” are pushing this plan that makes no pretense of including and respecting traditionalist believers. This new plan would also add new language to the UMC *Discipline* equating disapproval of homosexual practice with racism, and require future ordination candidates to approve of this new ethos.

2. Severely erode accountability for clergy misconduct on all other standards. UMC Next’s plan is not just about homosexuality. Other “chargeable offenses” for which UMC clergy may currently be disciplined include adultery, pre-marital sex, crime, spreading heretically false teachings, undermining the ministry of other pastors, child abuse, sexual abuse, using pornography, sexual harassment, racial discrimination, and embezzling. Apparently, UMC Next leaders are willing to sacrifice victims of these forms of clergy misconduct under the banner of LGBTQ liberationism. The UMC Next Plan would recklessly, in multiple different petitions, remove policies from the *Discipline* that are key for ensuring accountability for ALL clergy standards. In other words, UMC Next’s plan would make it easier for bishops and others to dismiss and cover-up the complaints and further hurt of victims of *all* forms of clergy misconduct.

3. Drive out traditionalist believers. Recognizing that a great many theologically traditionalist United Methodists could not in good conscience remain in such a denomination, UMC Next’s plan offers provisions for individual congregations, on either side of our divides, to have the option of leaving and paying for their properties, and potentially banding with other departing congregations to form new denominations. However, the exit terms offered are much less generous than what traditionalists have been willing to offer liberals considering leaving.

4. Re-do the “Way Forward” process. To sort out many remaining details, UMC Next proposes a remarkably similar

See ‘UMC Next’ Plans, *page 6*

'UMC Next' Plans Hostile Takeover of UMC, Protection for Abusive Clergy

continued from page 5

process to the three-year, multi-million-dollar "Way Forward" process our denomination has just been through. Their plan would create a new special commission, again named by the Council of Bishops, to submit legislation to be considered at yet another specially called General Conference session.

5. Potentially dramatically change core doctrine. UMC Next's petition for a new commission and special General Conference session includes calling for drafting a new denominational constitution that would include the "Methodist Articles of Religion"—but oddly makes no explicit mention of the "Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church." Currently, both are equally protected in our church law as core Doctrinal Standards. The latter includes some clearer teaching than the former on such matters as the coming judgment day and calling both the Old and New Testaments "the true rule and guide for faith and practice."

ACTION: ***Write to the 2020 General Conference delegates from your area, respectfully urging them to uphold traditional biblical values and to absolutely reject the radical, harmful UMC Next Plan. If you do not know who has been elected from your conference, please email UMAction staffer Dan Moran (dmoran@theird.org) with "WHO ARE MY DELEGATES?" in the Subject line and tell him in which annual conference your church is situated.***

UM Schools Embrace Islam, Unitarian Universalism

continued from page 1

Since February's General Conference made a new turn towards biblical faithfulness and accountability, there has been talk of many colleges and universities ending their affiliation with our denomination. Such developments raise the question of how much of a loss this would really be.

FOR REFLECTION: ***2 Corinthians 6:14–18, 11:13–15; 1 John 2:22–23; 2 John 7–11.***

ACTION: ***Write to Emory University's president to respectfully tell her that as long as the school remains United Methodist, you expect its spiritual programming to be led by faithful Christians rather than Unitarian Universalists: Dr. Claire Sterk / Emory University / 201 Dowman Drive, Suite 408 / Atlanta, GA 30322 / csterk@emory.edu***

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The Institute on Religion & Democracy
1023 15th Street NW, Suite 601, Washington, DC 20005-2601
202.682.4131 • *umaction@TheIRD.org*
www.TheIRD.org

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UMACTION STAFF
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