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

UM*Action* Briefing

Spring 2020

UMC Leaders Across Spectrum Announce 'Protocol' to Split United Methodism

After several lengthy meetings moderated by a professional mediator, leaders from conservative renewal caucuses, liberal caucuses, the Council of Bishops, and United Methodism outside of the USA reached consensus on a "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation." While homosexuality is the presenting controversy, the Protocol helpfully acknowledges that United Methodists "have fundamental differences" in theology and our treatment of Scripture. UM*Action* has documented bishops and other leaders of the liberal faction denying such core Christian truths as the resurrection of Christ.

Congregations can leave the UMC to join a new Methodist denomination and keep their property, without paying an 'exit fee.'

This proposal, now submitted to the 2020 General Conference, seeks to end the United Methodist Church's decades of infighting through separation into two or more new denominations. *(UPDATE: Due to COVID-19, General Conference is now being rescheduled for 2021.)*

The basic terms:

1. **Most of the denomination-wide structures will remain within the "Post-Separation United Methodist Church" (PSUMC),** expected to liberalize its standards on sexual morality and other issues.

2. **Every annual conference around the world would by default remain within the PSUMC,** but will have the right, within a narrow timeframe, to separate to form its own denomination or to join other like-minded United Methodists elsewhere in a new denomination. This requires a 57 percent super-majority vote.

3. **Any of the seven central conferences into which the UMC is divided overseas (each of which includes several annual conferences) can make the same choice,** but this requires a two-thirds super-majority.

4. **Congregations can leave the UMC to join a new Methodist denomination and keep their property, without paying an "exit fee."** In annual conferences who join a new Methodist denomination, any of their liberal congregations or clergy could leave their conferences to join the PSUMC.

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Inside:

Members of a diverse group of bishops and other United Methodist leaders gather for a group photo in Washington, D.C., after reaching agreement on a proposal that would allow congregations and conferences to separate into new denominations. (Photo courtesy of the Mediation Team)

An Episcopalian Appraisal of the UMC Protocol

Guest Column by Jeff Walton, IRD's Anglican Action Director

In evaluating the separation protocol to divide United Methodism, examining the Episcopal Church's litigious split is instructive. That split remains to be fully sorted: theological revisionists now require dioceses to permit same-sex rites that were once optional. Costly, time-consuming litigation continues in the case of two dioceses that now affiliate with the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). Episcopalians offer no canonical way—short of an act of General Convention—for a church to peaceably depart.

The new sanctuary of The Falls Church Anglican in Falls Church, Virginia, is dedicated in September 2019. The congregation underwent a "tabernacling" period for seven years following the loss of a historic property to the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia in litigation. (Image: Craig Thoburn / TFCA)

The negotiated UMC protocol establishes a 57 percent vote for annual conference re-affiliation. Local churches can do so with a simple majority. If those terms were in place during the Episcopal split, traditionalists would have likely launched with 14 intact dioceses rather than five, in addition to at least twice as many congregations leaving independently of their dioceses (600+ rather than 300). The former Presiding Bishop was advised by her chancellor in 2006 that a strategy of litigation prevented additional departures.

ACNA has grown with a generally fruitful strategy of church planting. But large numbers of theologically orthodox parishes remain within the old denomination. An equivalent protocol for Episcopalians likely would have seen the vast majority of theologically orthodox Episcopal dioceses and parishes depart.

There is a significant difference between the denominations: revisionists had a clear majority at Episcopal General Convention, while the global UMC is majority orthodox, even as U.S. leadership is in a different place.

This unfolding process will be messy. But division will allow evangelistic-minded Methodism to plant new congregations and grow.

This is not a promise "if you take down the rainbow flag, they will come." Theological orthodoxy is a prerequisite for church growth, but it is not in itself sufficient. There must be strong missional pull to reach people.

In 2006, I was part of a congregation that departed the Episcopal Church, longing to plant daughter congregations. Diocesan policy required the permission of neighboring congregations in order to plant, something unobtainable from half-empty progressive parishes that saw neighboring evangelical Episcopalians as competition.

Upon departing the Episcopal Church, the Falls Church Anglican was immediately able to plant. In 10 years, eight congregations were planted, two of which have gone on to plant daughter congregations of their own. All this was done amidst the expense of a multi-year lawsuit brought by the Episcopal Diocese.

What could evangelical Methodists accomplish without lawsuits and with the freedom to plant anywhere? I foresee a landscape in which traditionalists could plant in places like Boston or Seattle. None of this is guaranteed: It requires prayer and the providential work of the Holy Spirit. But compared to the harmful legacy of the Episcopal Church, United Methodists are presented with a better option.

UM*Action* Joins Bishops & Others in Vision for New Methodist Denomination

Given the likelihood of the next General Conference enacting a denominational separation plan, leaders of renewal groups, other key traditionalist United Methodists, and orthodox United Methodist bishops from around the world met in early March and came to consensus on our vision and initial plans for a new, global denomination to unify traditionalist United Methodists.

Our vision statement (released before the late decision to reschedule General Conference) declares: "If the 2020 General Conference adopts the Protocol legislation, with one voice and a spirit of humility we intend to form a global Wesleyan movement committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, and the work of the Holy Spirit in conveying God's truth, grace, renewal, and sanctification to all people who repent and believe."

Here are some key elements from our vision statement:

The Church's Culture and Mission

- Welcoming and embracing all who respond to God's love into the Body of Christ
- Engaging people in lifelong, intentional formation as disciples
- Reaching out to the world at its points of deepest need
- Equipping the local church in partnering with God to make disciples of Jesus Christ with a high value on evangelism,

African Leaders Back UMC Protocol

The Africa Initiative, a network of theologically traditionalist United Methodist leaders from across Sub-Saharan Africa, has become a major player in denominational affairs in recent years. In late February, Africa Initiative's leadership, including representatives from 13 African annual conferences, gathered for several days in South Africa. They ultimately issued a press release declaring: "After vigorous discussion and critique, the leaders of the UMC Africa Initiative have decided to support the passage of" the petition for the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, while asking for three minor amendments:

- For them to be allowed to use a modified version of the official UMC name and logo, which "bear significant spiritual and legal impact on our missional activities in Africa."
- For the required threshold for the seven overseas central conferences (each of which includes several annual conferences) to continue their ministry within the traditionalist side of the coming denominational divide to be lowered from a two-thirds super-majority to 57 percent. "We consider it unreasonable for United Methodists in Africa to have to vote to maintain our traditional beliefs," their statement said. But "for the sake of furthering amicable separation," they urged this compromise, which would "place the central conferences on an equal footing with annual conferences in the United States."
- "That the Protocol implementing legislation ensure that every central conference, annual conference, and local church be permitted to vote when it desires to do so under the processes of the legislation without any form of suppression or coercion by anyone."

This was a monumental development. There was understandable anger among many African delegates about their lack of representation in the Protocol negotiations and the unfairness of several of its terms. Many Americans sympathetic to the Protocol would have been hesitant to support it if they saw the majority of African delegates opposing it. Earlier in February, the Liberia Conference in West Africa, home to over 280,000 church members, caused a stir when it adopted, without dissent, a resolution affirming the sacred worth of ALL persons while refusing to condone homosexual practice, "support[ing] the need for an arranged separation," but asking for major amendments to the Protocol in the required voting thresholds and the division of asset funds.

The Africa Initiative leaders lamented unfair elements in the Protocol. But they ultimately supported the Protocol, with much more minor amendments than those sought by the Liberia Conference resolution.

Genuinely representative leaders of Africa are now willing to make MAJOR compromises and sacrifices in order for the Protocol to pass without dramatic changes. Are others willing to listen?

ACTION: ***Contact the delegates from your area and respectfully urge them to support the three amendments to the Protocol proposed by the Africa Initiative leaders. For help finding their names or contact information, please email dmoran@theird.org with "WHO ARE MY DELEGATES" in the subject line, being sure to tell us your annual conference.***

reaching youth and young adults, and developing global missional partnerships

- Becoming a nimble and less bureaucratic institution, continuously led by the Holy Spirit
- More movement than institution

Essential Doctrinal Beliefs

- The primacy of Scripture, leading to a biblical worldview
- The traditional understanding of Christian marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman as God's intended setting for human sexual expression
- The accountability of clergy and bishops to the doctrine, mission, and discipline of the Church

More information can be found at *www.newwesleyan denomination.com*. Participants and signatories included UM*Action* Director **John Lomperis,** IRD President **Mark Tooley,** UM*Action* Steering Committee Chair **Martin Nicholas,** and Bishops **Young Jin Cho** (retired), **Eduard Khegay** (Eurasia Episcopal Area), **Pedro Torio** (Baguio Episcopal Area in the Philippines), **John Wesley Yohanna** (Nigeria), **Mike Lowry** (Central Texas), **Scott Jones** (east Texas), **James Swanson** (Mississippi), and **Mark Webb** (Upper New York).

ACTION: ***Please begin talking to others in your congregation and annual conference about the importance of preparing to align with other United Methodists who will continue their ministries within the traditionalist, global denomination that will emerge from the coming divide.***

‘Just Resolution’ of Complaint Against Iowa Lesbian Cleric

For the last several years, our denomination has been besieged by a nationwide disobedience movement. Numerous activist clergy, often aided and abetted by sympathetic bishops, openly defy our denomination’s clear rules banning same-sex union ceremonies and prohibiting our ministers from being sexually active outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

In November, one of the most high-profile cases came to a tentative conclusion. Since June 2016, the Rev. **Anna Blaedel,** a campus ministry director in Iowa, has repeatedly publicly declared her defiance of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline’s* ban on “self-avowed practicing homosexual” clergy.

The problems run deeper than that. Blaedel, who sometimes uses the pronouns “they” and “them” for herself, has casually admitted to engaging in occult “Tarot” spiritual practice. When three faithful Iowa pastors first filed a formal complaint against her in 2016, Bishop **Julius Trimble** chose to wait until the very end of his time as Iowa bishop to callously dismiss the complaint, squashing accountability. Meanwhile, Blaedel demagogically promoted vulgar name-calling and harassing messages against the three faithful, accountability-seeking pastors, and even encouraged LGBTQ activists to disrupt their Sunday worship services. Within a short period, all three left United Methodist congregational ministry. As Iowa’s new bishop, **Laurie Haller** protected Blaedel from real accountability for officiating a pastorally harmful same-sex union. When UM*Action* Director **John Lomperis** filed a complaint in March 2018 over Blaedel’s continued defiance of her ordination vows to our church, hundreds of liberal activists in the Indiana Conference, including several of Bishop Trimble’s cabinet representatives (now that he is Indiana’s bishop), issued a manifesto unqualifiedly praising Blaedel for having “served faithfully” (even through her covenant breaking, bullying, and practicing Tarot) and lamenting their own “complicity” in apparent reference to “allow[ing]” a single Indiana United Methodist congregation to accept a theological traditionalist like Lomperis as a member.

The Rev. Anna Blaedel reacts to the process culminating in the Just Resolution (Photo: Vimeo screen capture / Iowa Annual Conference)

After a church trial was eventually scheduled, a “just resolution” was negotiated, mostly excluding Lomperis. Disappointingly, the resolution brought neither restoration nor the most definitive accountability, and featured much angry liberal rhetoric from Haller, Blaedel, and others.

But the pursuit of this latest complaint, by someone who knew and insisted on his own legal rights and who was not as vulnerable to retaliation as a pastor in Iowa, brought a measure of accountability. The complaint resulted in Blaedel’s going on “voluntary” leave of absence. While that differs from involuntary suspension, much of the effect is the same, and it takes her out of the regular appointment system (for now). While she had previously insisted on continuing her clergy status in our denomination, in the resolution she dramatically changed to declaring “that it is not currently possible for” her to continue ministry in either the UMC or its Iowa Conference. So she basically declared she would stop fighting to remain in the UMC and intends to leave, but will take some time to get her affairs in order. This result of the complaint was widely decried by liberal activists, with one major liberal group calling it “another big win” for renewal groups.

FOR REFLECTION: ***James 3:1; Deuteronomy 18:9-13; 1 Chronicles 10:13-14; Acts 19:17-20.***

ACTION: ***Pray for Anna Blaedel and those influenced by her.***

Fast-Growing Big UMC Churches Mostly Evangelical

Despite the overall membership decline in American United Methodism, there are still many pockets of growth. For the last several years, **Len Wilson,** Creative Director at St. Andrew UMC in Plano, Texas, has compiled a list of the 25 United Methodist congregations with over 1,000 weekly worshippers that have had the most rapid, sustained growth over the last five years on record.

Musicians lead Sunday worship at The Chapel in Rincon, Georgia, one of the fastest-growing large congregations in the United Methodist Church. (Photo: The Chapel Effingham campus / Facebook)

Each annual edition of Len's List reveals consistent trends: A strong majority (but not all) of these fastest-growing large United Methodist congregations are shepherded by senior pastors who are known as theologically traditionalist evangelicals. A disproportionate number of these pastors were trained at Asbury Theological Seminary (a bastion of evangelical Methodism), and only a small portion of these congregations are in the northern and Western jurisdictions, where bishops are often more liberal and more prone to bullying evangelical pastors and congregations.

The latest Len's List has 16 senior pastors of the 25 fastest-growing large congregations known as orthodox and eight who graduated from Asbury, more than any other seminary. Meanwhile, four official UMC seminaries heavily subsidized by apportionments lack a single alumnus: Claremont School of Theology, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, and Wesley Theological Seminary. A whopping 19 of these congregations are in the traditionalist-leaning Southeastern Jurisdiction, four are in the South Central Jurisdiction, and two are in the North Central Jurisdiction. *None* are in our denomination's two most liberal U.S. Jurisdictions, the Northeastern and Western.

These trends are even more dramatic in the bigger picture. In every annual Len's List since 2015, *not a single one* of the fastest-growing congregations has formally declared itself to be a theologically liberal, LGBTQ liberationist "Reconciling congregation," affiliated with the unofficial Reconciling Ministries Network. Of the 14 congregations that made it onto Len's List at least twice since 2015, 11 had orthodox senior pastors, six were shepherded by Asbury alumni, nine were in the Southeast, and not one was in the liberal-dominated Northeastern or Western Jurisdictions. Of the five congregations who made it onto Len's List every year since 2015, three were in the Southeast and four were led by orthodox senior pastors.

FOR REFLECTION: ***John 15:1-8.***

ACTION: ***Review some of the past UMAction interviews with some of the pastors of these fastest-growing United Methodist congregations, which could include helpful advice for your own local ministry:*** **www.juicyecumenism.com/topic/effective-united-methodist-churches/**

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5. Based on the report that our denomination's general agencies hold about $120 million in liquid unrestricted net assets, $25 million would be devoted to supporting a new theologically traditionalist Methodist denomination(s), $2 million would be set aside for any new liberal denomination who felt the PSUMC did not become liberal enough, and $39 million would be devoted to ensuring continued funding for Africa University as well as for ministries in U.S. communities historically harmed by the sin of racism.

6. While conferences and congregations are sorting out their alignments, there will be a moratorium within the PSUMC on enforcing the biblical standards of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* forbidding same-sex weddings, "self-avowed practicing homosexual" clergy, and the use of denominational funds "to promote the acceptance of homosexuality." All complaints related to these standards "shall be held in abeyance" until the next General Conference.

There is obviously much that is unfair. Ideally, the burden would be on those who oppose our denomination's historic standards to take the initiative to vote to separate. The fifty-seven percent threshold required of annual conference votes and the two-thirds threshold imposed on central conferences are morally indefensible. Liberals cynically insisted on blatantly rigging

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the votes in their favor, so that they can "win" a conference without even having a majority. (Though this does help ensure that any conferences joining a new traditionalist denomination would be more strongly conservative.) The $25 million is not properly a "gift"—it is liberals taking over the assets of agencies of a denomination officially devoted to biblical standards, and then agreeing to share only a fraction with those keeping the faith. (Though it is also true liberals have long controlled these agencies, and agency assets are a tiny fraction of the roughly $60 billion in assets held by UMC annual conferences, districts, and congregations in the USA.)

Nevertheless, traditionalist United Methodists have increasingly come to see this Protocol as "the best bad deal on the table." Our conflict is already driving people and congregations to leave our denomination or withhold giving, and even entire annual conferences are exploring separation. Without such a "bi-partisan" bargain, it is possible that at the next General Conference, liberals may find that they have the votes for a much more ruthless and complete takeover of our denomination, without much grace in letting traditionalist congregations leave with our church properties. While a narrow conservative majority seems likelier, we wonder how well biblical standards would actually be enforced in the US when our denomination's system entrusts that to bishops. American bishops are becoming increasingly aggressive and heavy-handed in their liberalism, and this looks likely to worsen when new bishops would be elected in July. The more bishops created a *de facto* reality of our denomination having permissive sexual standards for its clergy, the more we would expect traditionalist believers to leave, probably involving lawsuits over church properties similar to those on which other denominations have spent millions of dollars.

The Protocol has been endorsed by these caucus groups from across the spectrum:

- The Confessing Movement
- Good News
- Wesleyan Covenant Association
- Mainstream UMC
- Reconciling Ministries Network
- Uniting Methodists
- UMC Next

We at UM*Action* see the need for separation, and strongly support the amendments proposed by our African brothers and sisters. If an acceptable separation agreement cannot be reached, then we are prepared to do what we ethically can at General Conference to maintain our standards and enhance enforcement. But that would mean fighting an increasingly costly and bitter war over an increasingly broken and dying denomination.

FOR REFLECTION: ***2 Corinthians 6:14-18.***

ACTION: ***Please commit to praying fervently for the next General Conference and its aftermath.***

UMAction Briefing

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