

The United Methodist Church has been divided for decades over issues concerning human sexuality and definition of marriage, and how these issues impinge upon the selection, ordination, and deployment of pastors. Underlying these issues are serious differences over authority of the Bible. In addition, there is widespread dissatisfaction with many bishops and pastors who have failed to uphold the church's teachings on these matters, or who have acted in outright disobedience to these teachings. In Feb. 2019 the UMC held a special General Conference (worldwide body of delegates) to decide these matters once and for all. Much to the chagrin of "progressives" (who seek to change the church's official teaching the matters stated above) the "Traditional Plan" was approved by delegates. This plan reaffirms the church's teachings on human sexuality<sup>1</sup> and provides penalties for pastors and bishops who act in violation of the church's beliefs.

In March 2019 a series of "Unity Forums" were held at our church. Pastor Richard presented a variety of materials to explain what happened at the General Conference and also the fact that many pastors and bishops (in the U.S.) had already stated their unwillingness to live by the decision made for the whole church. This put the UMC in a crisis.

During the summer of 2019 leaders from across the spectrum and the world met to work out a solution to the crisis. Their work resulted in a "A Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation." This document outlined a process for the UMC to amicably separate into two (possibly three) new denominations: one "progressive" and one "traditional." The Protocol would allow an Annual Conference to vote to leave the UMC and join a new Methodist denomination. Any congregation that did not agree with its Annual Conference, could, by vote, join (or remain in) the other denomination. It is important for a congregation to have this option in order to keep its property if they leave an Annual Conference. It was also agreed that the "progressives" may keep the name "United Methodist" and the "traditionalists" will form a new denomination called "The Global Methodist Church." The new "Global Methodist Church" will be rooted in the Bible, historic church teachings, and John Wesley's theology for a revived and renewed Christian faith.

This Protocol was to be voted upon at a General Conference (worldwide meeting) of the UMC in 2020. Due to COVID that has been postponed to 2022! All indications are that the Protocol continues to have enough support throughout the UMC around the world that it will be approved by the General Conference when it does meet. During this "interim period" (between General Conferences) there has been a tacit agreement among all parties that they will not take actions to upset the agreement, i. e. the governance and leaders of the church will not take actions to punish or marginalize either "conservative" or "progressive" pastors and congregations.

Unfortunately, this peace has recently been broken by the actions of three bishops in the U.S. – one in North Georgia, one in New Jersey, one in Southern California. In N. Georgia

and in NJ the bishops announced the relocation of pastors without consulting with the Staff Parish Relations Committee or the Church Council of the congregation. Neither the church nor the pastor had requested the change and the bishops have not provided plausible reasons for their removal. In Southern California the bishop informed three long established Korean pastors that they were being reassigned from their churches. Again, this transpired with no consultation with the Staff Parish Relations Committee or Church Council of the local church.

This practice is in violation of the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. The Staff Parish Relations Committee is in communication regularly with the District Superintendent and Bishop as to the status of their relationship with the current pastor. Forms are filled out requesting reassignment and evaluating current situations. There is to be communication between all parties prior to assigning a pastor to a different church.

The three bishops involved are “progressive” and the five pastors removed (4 of whom are Korean) are “traditional” and likely to advocate for their congregations to join the new traditionalist denomination – The Global Methodist Church. The actions of these bishops appear to be an abuse of power, are violations of church law, and may be intended as a warning to all other “traditionalist” pastors and congregations. This has caused a nation-wide controversy in U.M. circles and apprehension among conservative clergy under appointment of progressive bishops.

Many U. M. congregations across the United States feel “stuck” as they await the next General Conference to finalize plans and procedures to implement the “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation.” Some congregations have already announced they are not waiting for the General Conference 2022 and are in the process of making arrangements to leave the denomination (which could involve them in legal battles over property).

We, as members of the Staff Parish Relations Committee, believe it is of great importance for our congregation to be well informed and aware of current happenings within the United Methodist Church, as they can have an impact on us going forward. The next General Conference of the UMC is September 2022 and that is a long time to wait for a solution. Unfortunately, a good solution is not immediately available. Though we are all “stuck” in this holding pattern, we ask that each of you join us in holding our local church, as well as the worldwide United Methodist Church, in prayer daily. Please ask for God’s guidance as we prayerfully move toward a solution. We are available to answer your questions and encourage you to seek information (see United Methodist News Service, Good News Magazine, The Wesleyan Covenant Association), take part in a small group discussion focusing on current issues within the UMC and how they can affect our congregation. Consider and evaluate your personal position on the future of “your” church.

In our Lord’s service, *Staff Parish Relations Committee*

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<sup>1</sup> 2016 Book of Discipline: paragraphs 161 C & G -

C) Marriage—We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

G) Human Sexuality—We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift. Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. We deplore all forms of the commercialization, abuse, and exploitation of sex. We call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation of children and for adequate protection, guidance, and counseling for abused children. All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence. The Church should support the family in providing age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults.

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.