Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation

Presented at First United Methodist Church, Madison, WI February 9, 2020

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This presentation is best understood by referring to the actual document of the Protocol that can be found at:

https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/the-agreement

I begin with a reminder that despite some news reports to the contrary, nothing has happened yet and nothing has been approved. The UMC has not split. General Conference meets in Minneapolis from May 5th -15th and that is where the lay and clergy delegates elected by their Annual Conferences will make all decisions.

I would like to briefly share the origin of the Protocol, for it really began with a meeting called by Bishop John Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Episcopal Area. He called together fifteen people, five traditionalists, five centrists, and five progressives and they met in Chicago in July. Those in attendance agreed that two persons from each of those constituencies, as well as two Central Conference Bishops would continue to meet with a mediator. The Central Conferences are those UM churches outside the US.

Names of potential mediators were submitted and in the end Mr. Kenneth Feinberg volunteered his time. Mr. Feinberg is Jewish, but stated that he had a deep love for religion and a significant desire to see our denomination move forward in ministry. An attorney friend of Mr. Feinberg’s who is a member of a UMC in Washington, D.C. was the person who asked him if he would help by mediating.

As undoubtedly you’ve heard, Mr. Feinberg is highly respected and mediated the Sept. 11th Victim Compensation Fund as well as the Agent Orange Victim Compensation Fund among others.

While this mediated agreement is usually referred to as the Protocol, I’d like to share its full title because I believe it’s a better descriptor of what it’s about:

“Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation”

Following eight Whereas statements of Principles that basically state why this is needed it moves into the Articles themselves. We’ll skip focusing on the Whereas statements and move to the Articles.

Article I outlines the agreement and commitment to the Protocol

1. It was agreed to unanimously, and the participants agreed to fully support it and recommend it to the General Conference coming up in May in Minneapolis. In addition they will persuade other groups with which they’re affiliated to support the Protocol, even if they were previously involved in supporting other legislative plans.
2. States that the intent of a separation restructuring of the church will multiply its mission.
3. The participants have now worked to put together the actual legislation and any enabling legislation. The legislation was just released on Friday, February 7, 2020. If you would like to read the entire 33 pages of the legislation you can see it at this website: www.gracethroughseparation.com

The Michigan and Sierra Leone Annual Conferences have called special sessions to forward it so that it can properly go before General Conference - since the usual deadline for submitting legislation was in September.

1. They’ve agreed that this legislation can’t be separated out into various parts so that only some pieces are considered. This is very important because of how the Traditional plan in February had a number of parts which were declared to be unconstitutional by our Judicial Council and yet the entire plan was not then declared to be out of order. Therefore we were stuck with the parts that did pass.
2. The participants also agreed that they would not make claims for additional assets than what is stated in the Protocol.

Article II defines terms and points out that after the separation there will be new Methodist denominations – and also the Post-separation United Methodist Church. I should also point out again that the United Methodist Churches outside of the US are in what’s called the Central Conferences.

In the US it is believed that the Traditionalists tied to the Wesleyan Covenant Association will leave and start a new Methodist denomination. There may also be additional Traditionalist denominations started. There is also the possibility that a Liberationist group not yet formally formed may leave and start a Methodist denomination that is very progressive and would have very little structure. In order to form another Methodist denomination the minimum number of churches needs to be 100 and there are additional qualifications that must be met. These groups would basically start all over as a denomination leaving the current administrative structure behind.

In reality the vast majority of the current United Methodist Church in the US would remain post-separation.

Article III states the Process and Timeline.

1. Groups would have to register their intent to form a new denomination before May 15, 2021
2. Central Conferences, by a 2/3 vote would have until Dec. 31, 2021 to leave the UMC and go with another newly formed denomination.
3. By July 1, 2021 Annual Conferences can choose to leave the UMC if 20% of the delegates agree to hold a vote and then if 57% agree to leave.

I believe that this is not something our WI Annual Conference would do and that we would remain in the post-separation UMC.

1. Any local church that would like a different affiliation than it’s Annual Conference can vote to leave. If a church is content to be in the denomination of the Annual Conference then it does not need to vote. If it wishes to vote to join another new Methodist denomination the local church council determines if it’s to be a simple majority of members present and voting or 2/3 present and voting at a special Church Conference meeting. Churches have until Dec. 31 of 2024 for this. So, for example, if the WI Annual Conference does not hold a vote it would remain in the UMC. First Church would not need to vote and would remain in the UMC.

Article IV talks of the financial agreement.

Basically Annual Conferences and local churches keep their property, assets and liabilities. The Trust Clause is not enforced. The Trust Clause is included in the deeds of UMC churches and states that all property is held in trust for the denomination. Property of those churches who leave will instead be held in trust by their new Methodist denomination.

In addition:

1. $25 Million dollars will be paid to the New Traditionalist Methodist denominations over a four-year period. If there is more than one then it will be split according to their total membership.
2. $2 Million dollars will be available to potential additional non-Traditionalist Methodist denominations for a four-year period. If there is more than one denomination then the General Council on Finance and Administration, in conjunction with the leaders of those denominations will determine how the seed money is split.
3. $39 Million dollars will be allocated in recognition of the historic role of the Methodist movement in systems of systematic racial violence, exploitation and discrimination. These monies will be used to strengthen ministries by and for Asian, Black, Hispanic-Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander Communities as well as Africa University. This $39 Million comes about by the Traditionalists foregoing an additional $13 Million beyond their $25M and the post separation UMC contributing $26M over 8 years.
4. The pension plans for lay and clergy remain in place, will be held by Wespath, our Pension Board, and all liabilities will follow Annual Conferences and local churches who leave the UMC to go to their new Methodist denominations.
5. Current Boards and Agencies, like UMCOR, General Board of Global Ministries, Board of Church & Society, etc. will remain with the UMC. Likewise will all their assets.

And perhaps here is where I’ll interject to say that in light of the amount of assets our Boards have, paying the Traditionalists $25M is, in my view, not an exorbitant sum. There were $621M net assets of the agencies and boards at the end of 2018 according to the audit report of General Council on Finance and Administration.

Article V contains an agreed to moratorium on all administrative or judicial processes related to restrictions in the Book of Discipline relative to self-avowed practicing homosexuals or same-sex weddings. These are to be held in abeyance. Many Bishops have agreed verbally to this moratorium, including our own Bishop way back during Annual Conference when Bishop Jung stated that there would be no trials in the WI Conference. Bishops would put any processes in abeyance.

In Article VI it was hoped that the post separation UMC could meet immediately following General Conference in May as a Regional Conference to take the restrictive language related to LGBTQ+ out of the Discipline. However, that timeline can’t happen because the Regional Conference which is what the US will hopefully become, making it’s own changes to the Book of Discipline, will need to be approved by every Annual Conference since it’s a constitutional change – and that amendment process will take 18 months so the earliest would be January of 2022. Therefore you won’t see Article VI points 5 & 6 in the new legislation as it appears in the original document. The other points state that financial implications and Judicial Council review will happen.

I should point out that the Protocol has received very widespread support across the church, far more than any other previously submitted plan. The other plans still exist in legislation that will go before General Conference, but it seems that the primary focus will now be on the Protocol.

Now I know my clergy colleagues who are a part of our congregation may want to know how this affects them. If a clergyperson, active or retired, wishes to transfer their membership from the UMC to a new Methodist denomination they have until July 1, 2021 to inform their Bishop. If the Annual Conference remains in the UMC and clergy wish to remain then you don’t need to do anything.

And as for clergy candidates in the ordination process who wish to go to a new Methodist Denomination they are grandfathered in so that wherever they are in their process goes with them to the new Denomination.