

Reservations and Hope about the Protocol

By Tim McClendon – February 11, 2020

<https://wesleyancovenant.org/2020/02/10/reservations-and-hope-about-the-protocol/>

Will The United Methodist Church separate into two or more denominations? Only its General Conference can say for sure. The recently announced “Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation” has gained a good deal of traction across the UM connection. The press and social media plus the blogosphere have been reporting things as if the protocol is a done deal; it is not. However, as a veteran of seven General Conferences I do acknowledge there is more unity around this solution to our 48-year impasse than I have ever seen.

Some would say our stalemate has been over sexuality. I would rather frame it as a huge difference in how we understand the authority and interpretation of Scripture. The new protocol aims for a parting of the ways over this issue since we obviously have irreconcilable differences regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. That does not mean, however, that I am sold on the protocol, or that it will not be amended into an unrecognizable mush at General Conference.

At first glance it looks pretty good. It pleases many progressives and traditionalists, and the majority of bishops as well. I am not thrilled that there were more bishops and progressives than traditionalists in the negotiating room. After all, the vote, not just at last February’s Special General Conference, but at all twelve General Conferences since 1972 have upheld the same stance of the church that says we welcome everyone and find all persons of sacred worth, but the “practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” This is not just the teaching of 48 years. It is the church’s teaching for the past 2,000, and an additional 2,000 when we account for our Jewish heritage. I also think this traditional view could be upheld at this May’s General Conference, too.

This is the reason many people wonder why the traditionalists seem to be shown the door. Why do we have to give up the name “United Methodist?” I think it is a valid point, but there is another reality at work. That reality is the name of the denomination has not only changed over the years anyway, but it actually now has enough baggage to be a detriment to faithful Bible-believing, *Book of Discipline*-keeping, United Methodists. For instance, my own mother was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, then The Methodist Church, and finally the UM Church. It begs the question, “What’s in a name?” My personal preference is that traditionalists retain “Methodist” somewhere in a new church name. It is who we are in our expression of the Christian faith.

But I also know The United Methodist Church name is important to my friends and colleagues in other parts of our global church where governments are friendlier to churches tied to the U.S. I have personally seen that first-hand in the Philippines, Mozambique, South Africa, Bulgaria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, and Zambia. But what I have also seen is the faithfulness of people to Scripture over the denomination. If the UM Church, now or as a post-separation UM Church, supports liberalizing its sexual ethics then rank and file church members, especially in Africa, would overwhelmingly support traditional marriage and ordination standards instead of remaining in the UM Church. Even an approach that would only allow United Methodists in the U.S. to adopt more permissive sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and ordination standards would not satisfy those United Methodists who regard these matters as presenting issues of more fundamental theological matters. One only has to look at how the Methodists of Cote D'Ivoire joined the UM Church because they could not abide the liberalization of the British Methodist Church.

As much as I would prefer to see traditionalists remain and progressives leave, we are stuck with a number of bishops who will not enforce UM Church standards, and it is unlikely they would be held accountable for not doing so. With the elections of more centrists and progressives as General Conference delegates in the U.S., there might not ever be another traditionalist bishop elected. Add to that the liberal slant of many of our denominational boards, agencies, and their staffs then it is no wonder many traditionalists are ready to hit the exits.

Of course, my preference is that only annual conferences vote on the protocol and so spare as many local churches as possible the grief of debating and voting on it at the congregational level. I also hope local pastors know how powerful their voices are in this process. I have heard some talk that local pastors would not be allowed to vote on these matters in their annual conferences. That is not true. *Discipline* paragraph 602.1(d) clearly states that local pastors can vote on *everything* at annual conference except delegates to Jurisdictional and General Conferences, constitutional amendments, and conference relations of clergy. Local pastors should show up at annual conferences and vote!

There is much to ponder and pray about. I hope we can make it through all this without losing sight of our mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ. God bless the General Conference delegates as they discern our future. If the protocol is the best solution we have, then I will take it.

The Rev. Dr. Tim McClendon is the senior pastor at St. John's United Methodist Church in Aiken, South Carolina. He is a frequent contributor to United Methodist publications, most especially with his blog: [A Potter's View](#), where a version of the above essay first appeared on January 22, 2020.