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The Time Is Now: Confessing Movement Board of Directors Endorses “Protocol”

On January 15, 2020 the Board of Directors of The Confessing Movement strongly affirmed a Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, stating, “We endorse the protocol and pledge ourselves to continue working for new expressions of our Methodist Wesleyan movement.”

The Protocol proposes a way to resolve the five-decade long conflict in the UMC related to our understanding of human sexuality and underlying disagreements regarding Biblical interpretation and theological matters. It outlines a series of broad provisions to guide an amicable separation of the United Methodist Church into two or more denominations in the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition. The Protocol was negotiated, with the help of renowned mediator Kenneth Feinberg, by a group of sixteen UMC bishops and other leaders representing the broad theological spectrum of the UMC. Patricia Miller, Executive Director of The Confessing Movement, was an active participant in the five-month process that led to unanimous support for the Protocol from the members of the mediation team.

In envisioning a path to amicable separation of the United Methodist Church, the Protocol states, “The United Methodist Church and its members aspire to multiply the Methodist mission in the world by restructuring the Church through respectful and dignified separation.” The agreement specifically envisions that a new traditionalist Methodist denomination and a “post-separation United Methodist Church” will be formed, while leaving open the possibility of other new Methodist expressions which may emerge.
Other provisions include:

• Continuing existence for the United Methodist Church described as the “post-separation UMC.” Dissolution of the UMC would require constitutional amendments which in our current environment would have no realistic chance of passage and would further delay a resolution of our conflict.

• All Central Conferences (conferences outside the U.S.) and annual conferences would remain a part of the post-separation UMC unless they vote to affiliate with the new traditionalist Methodist Church or other emerging Methodist expression. No Central Conference, annual conference or local church MUST vote, but all MAY vote to join a different Methodist expression if desired.

• Central Conferences, annual conferences or local churches who vote to join the traditionalist Methodist Church or another emerging Methodist expression will be able to keep all property and assets without penalty. Exiting Central Conferences will require a 2/3 majority, U.S. annual conferences will require 57% majority and local church councils may choose between a simple majority or 2/3 majority vote of their members to leave. Bishops and District Superintendents MAY NOT block opportunities for votes.

• Wespath will continue to administer pension programs for all emerging denominations and all liabilities and responsibilities will be transferred appropriately and proportionally to new denominations.

• A portion of the approximately $120 million of unrestricted reserve funds held within the United Methodist Church will be shared as follows: $25 million to the new traditionalist expression; $39 million for Africa University and support of racial/ethnic ministry in the UMC and emerging Methodist expressions; and $2 million held for other new expressions which may develop.

• A moratorium is requested on the processing of any existing or new complaints or trials relating to LGBTQ+ matters and bishops are requested to make no effort to close any congregation without its express desire or intent until after these matters are decided at the General Conference in May, 2020.

The full text of the Protocol and a document containing frequently asked questions can be found on the homepage of our website at www.confessingumc.org.

Members of The Confessing Movement Board of Directors engaged in robust discussion examining both the positive benefits and a variety of concerns related to the Protocol. While grieving that separation within the UMC has become necessary and acknowledging that the Protocol process resulted in some difficult compromises, the Board believes the Protocol provides a positive and productive way to position evangelical, orthodox believers for a new and vital future.

For decades members of The Confessing Movement have been aware of the continuing decline in the UMC. They have prayed for a church revitalized for evangelism and effective discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition. The Protocol offers a path beyond the current impasse and toward this long-prayed-for growth. Charles Kyker, a past president of the Board, encouraged the Board, rather than becoming focused on the yet unanswered questions, to take a thirty-thousand-foot view. He noted, “We will be freed to experience a new day in the church. Traditional new churches are going to grow; we will start new churches; and thirty years from now we will see a great new harvest of disciples for Christ and the church.”
The Protocol opens the door for a new denomination that honors Biblical authority, embraces the broad orthodoxy of Christian history and carries forward our distinctive Wesleyan and Methodist doctrine and distinctives. Since its inception the UMC has continued to drift from these historic Christian foundations. The Confessing Movement was founded to address precisely these concerns. Our mission statement affirms, “Confessing faith in Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, The Confessing Movement exists to help retrieve and celebrate the Church’s classic biblical and doctrinal identity and to live it out together as followers of Jesus Christ.” We believe the Protocol provides a profound opportunity to put the struggle for doctrinal clarity behind and build a new denomination which stands on Biblical authority, which teaches the faith once delivered to the saints, and which embraces our Wesleyan distinctiveness.

Further, the Board of The Confessing Movement believes that we need to act now before the opportunity passes or there is further decline of the strength of the church. Chris Buskirk, newly elected to the Board, pressed this point saying, “We must act decisively at this General Conference or the church will begin to disintegrate. We must seize the moment with all we have.” For this reason, The Confessing Movement urges the delegates to the 2020 General Conference to take up the Protocol and move early in the Conference to adopt the implementing legislation.

While offering full support to the Protocol, The Confessing Movement Board also expressed special concern for the impact an amicable separation may have on the people, churches and ministries which are changing lives for Christ in the Central Conferences. Central Conferences represent the growing edge of United Methodism. This was reflected in the decision of the 2016 General Conference to authorize expanded episcopal leadership in Africa and to increase funding for theological education in the Central Conferences. We pray that these commitments will be upheld. Further, if the Protocol is adopted, we encourage the post-separation UMC and all new Methodist denominations to pray for our brothers and sisters in the Central Conferences and, in consultation with their leaders, to continue support in vital areas of need.

In leading the Board into discussion of the Protocol, Pat Miller reminded the members, “We love the church and don’t want to see the United Methodist Church separate. Yet, we do not want to see the conflict continue. Already it has consumed too much time and effort which has drained energy from the true mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Over many years I have been a part of numerous efforts to find a way to resolve our conflict. All have ended with no agreement until the Protocol. This is the first time significant leaders from across the theological spectrum and representing various parts of the UMC have been able to come to unanimous agreement. I believe the Holy Spirit has guided us to this moment.”
Why I SUPPORT the Protocol

As a child I walked to my neighborhood Methodist Church, later attended MYF, accepted Christ, was baptized and joined the Methodist Church. When the church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, I became a United Methodist. I am a United Methodist by choice. I believe John Wesley got theology, doctrine, mission and ministry right. I love our church!

Unfortunately, for decades the UMC has been 2 denominations trying to live together in unity. Disobedience regarding the Discipline, brokenness, resistance, bitterness, division and open conflict have plagued the church since 1972, escalating year after year after year. At the special called General Conference of 2019 when the Traditional Plan passed and open opposition and defiance erupted, it became apparent to all, even those who had resisted the thought of separation, that the United Methodist Church could not continue as we are. There are two options: stay and continue to fight or find a way to amicably separate.

It breaks my heart that our beloved UMC is at this point. While most believe it is time for separation, the biggest concern and complaint from traditionalists about the Protocol is they feel those who want to change the church to reflect our liberal culture should be the ones to leave. I agree, however, many progressives and centrists have repeatedly stated they will not leave. They will stay and fight and continue to be blatantly disobedient. Traditionalists like me are not willing to see our beloved denomination continue in this perpetual state of chaos and turmoil in order to keep the denomination together, but would rather protect Wesleyan tradition and historic Christian faith to be better able to proclaim the Gospel and make disciples for Jesus Christ unhindered by a continuous battle that undermines our witness and ministry.

As one of the 16 who adopted the Protocol, let me assure you the decision did not come easily. The participation, dialogue and consensus were and are (in my words) fragile. All participated in good faith and with respect for one another. By the grace of God, Ken Feinberg was the mediator who provided leadership and set the methods of dialogue making it possible for us to come to a unanimous agreement. The Protocol is not a perfect plan, certainly not what I wanted or would write. However, this Protocol is the best agreement possible. I support it as our best option and invite you to join me.
Are There Reasons for Separation Besides the Issues of Marriage and Homosexual Practice?

— BY DR. RILEY CASE —

Unfortunately, yes. The church has been, and is especially now, divided on issues of Biblical authority and faithfulness to historic Christian and Wesleyan doctrine. Methodism historically and evangelicals in our modern day have affirmed the full authority of Scripture as the Holy Spirit-inspired interpretation of the mighty acts of God in history. The Bible is an indispensable part of God’s revelation. The wisdom of the Church through the years (tradition), the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion (experience) and the Spirit-guided mind (reason) are the interpreters of Scripture. Orthodox Christianity believes the canon is closed. God is not revealing new Truth through secular culture or academic cleverness.

Unfortunately, parts of modern Methodism have seriously departed from this understanding of Biblical Truth that is pretty much agreed upon by almost all Christians of all cultures. The very word “progressive” suggests that some believe that new truth is being discovered that makes invalid truths that have been at the core of Christianity (and Methodism). These include teachings on Original Sin, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Trinity, and the work of the Holy Spirit. These are the doctrines or truths John Wesley described as “essentials.” These are at the heart of the gospel. Story after story is told of persons who tell of being raised in Methodist churches but who never heard the gospel and were never challenged to accept Jesus Christ as Savior. Our seminaries, our educational literature, our mission outreach have all been affected. Our modern thinking has exchanged the truth revealed through Scripture to convictions that arise from our own inner wisdom (and prejudices).

Because Methodism is known as broadminded and respectful of many different kinds of people with many different convictions, it has been able to live for years with these tensions. It has been a “big tent” under which we have been able to work together. But this is now becoming a big tent with no boundaries. With the revolution in traditional morals, especially as it relates to sexual revolution in the last 50 years or so, it is evident that the chasm between those who hold to the historic faith and those who would set aside historic faith for new understandings has widened to the point that it is almost as if we operate from two different faiths. Conversations and dialogues and listening to each other have not brought us any closer together. The church has been damaged by our infighting. Better to agree to separate and go our separate ways.
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