

Monthly Update

February 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The February Update discusses various aspects of the plans we will face at the 2019 General Conference in St. Louis. Since the visible issue is that of homosexual practice, I have added a sheet entitled “Homosexual Practice” at the very end [Not included in the on-line version of the Update]. We composed this paper years ago to give people a concise summary of pertinent statistics and data on this practice, since we knew that there was a lot of information – and misinformation – in this area. We recognized that most people did not have the time nor the inclination to delve into the truth and nuances of this, so we wanted to offer them a short summary.

As stated in the body of the Update itself, there is a summary of the most prominent plans: The One Church Plan, The Connectional Conference Plan, The Simple Plan, The Traditional Plan, and The Modified Traditional Plan. Of these five, the Connectional Conference Plan is the most complicated and unworkable. The Simple Plan was an interesting last-minute introduction – but has little chance of passing.

The One Church Plan appears attractive with a nice-sounding name – and has a great deal of high-level support – but we need to examine how it would actually work out. If adopted, it would truly be the “camel that got its head under the tent” in that things would go well at first. Then controversy would erupt in churches all across our connection with a power struggle over how each congregation would treat the issue. Through subtle but unrelenting pressure, the shift would be toward homosexual normalization until this practice permeated the denomination. Those individuals and families who adhered to the traditional view of sexuality (between husband and wife within the context of marriage) would leave. This plan must be opposed at all costs.

The Traditional Plan, or The Modified Traditional Plan are the only viable choices; they maintain our denomination’s stance on sexuality and reflect true, biblical morality.

One thing that is problematic in this discussion is the position of the Council of Bishops. The fact that they have endorsed The One Church Plan and aggressively promoted it coupled with the “Council of Bishops’ letter to the global LGBTQ community” raise troubling questions. Have they lost their insight to recognize sin? Or have they lost their ability to call out sin when it exists in the body of our Church? Both of these actions call into question their leadership. I suspect this is something that will need to be addressed – but not now; save it for the General Conference in 2020.

As far as standing for biblical truth, we in Concerned Methodists will never waver!

We ask that you be in prayer about the proceedings of this event. It may very well be that the future of the United Methodist Church – and possibly the eternal futures of untold numbers of individuals – hangs in the balance.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

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February 2019 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

If you wish to go fast, walk alone. If you wish to go far, walk together. – Chinese proverb

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The Good Stuff

+ ***Setting Goals for Fruitful Living.*** In the 70s, I experienced a turning point in my walk with Christ. It started with 2 Samuel 7, which inspired me to follow in King David's footsteps. He spent time alone with God, offering praise and thanksgiving. He would also listen as the Lord revealed truth and offered insight about the future. Because of what he learned, David was able to set goals and stay aligned with them. Desiring that kind of solitude, I spent several days alone in a camper at Georgia's Stone Mountain. Most of the time, I was silent, listening intently for God's voice. I asked Him to speak to me regarding my future, and He answered. Using a journal, I recorded the goals He inspired. The things He communicated so impacted my choices and so greatly blessed me that I continued the discipline every couple of months.

In order to stay on the path God intends for our lives, we should plan times to stop, ask, and listen for guidance. The world throws confusing messages at us all day long, and we need to check our course frequently. These conversations with the Lord are vital for a thriving life of godly impact.

[Note: This is something that I very much need to remember. It spoke to me, so I offer it to you – AOM]

– Dr. Charles Stanley's meditation from In Touch Ministries; Jan 5, 2019.

+ ***Super Bowl National Anthem Singer Slams Anthem Protesters.*** Singer Gladys Knight apparently isn't terribly impressed with the anthem-kneeling crowd – and she let everyone know it in a statement provided to Fox News. Knight's decision to sing the national anthem at the Super Bowl in February had been a controversial one, as musical acts have been boycotting the game over the perception that Colin Kaepernick is being blackballed from the league. Knight, however, wasn't quite as deferential to the former 49ers quarterback.

"I understand that Mr. Kaepernick is protesting two things, and they are police violence and injustice," she said in her statement. "It is unfortunate that our National Anthem has been dragged into this debate when the distinctive senses of the National Anthem and fighting for justice should each stand alone....I am here today and on Sunday, Feb. 3 to give the Anthem back its voice, to stand for that historic choice of words, the way it unites us when we hear it and to free it from the same prejudices and struggles I have fought long and hard for all my life, from walking back hallways, from marching with our social leaders, from using my voice for good – I have been in the forefront of this battle longer than most of those voicing their opinions to win the right to sing our country's Anthem on a stage as large as the Super Bowl LIII."

The star concluded her statement saying she hopes the confusion of the two messages can blend into one lesson of unity for America, which she hopes to kickstart when she sings the anthem at the Super Bowl, Fox News noted.

– Liberty Eagle; Jan 20, 2019.

A Way Forward.

+ **Main plans submitted to GC2019** (as it stands at this time):

The most prominent plans submitted for consideration at the special conference are:

* The One Church Plan would shift to churches and conferences decisions regarding ministry with or by LGBTQ persons rather than maintaining a single standard that operates throughout the worldwide church. It would also remove some of the language in the Book of Discipline that limit LGBTQ people's involvement as United Methodists.

* The Connectional Conference Plan would create three connectional conferences based on perspective on LGBTQ issues. The three connectional conferences would function throughout the worldwide church and the five existing U.S. jurisdictions would be abolished.

* The Simple Plan (a recent addition to the mix) would remove all language from the Book of Discipline that excludes LGBTQ people from full participation in the church.

* The Traditional Plan would affirm the current language about homosexuality in the Book of Discipline and seek to strengthen enforcement for violations.

* The Modified Traditional Plan would add to the Traditional Plan a committee with authority to hold bishops accountable to the sexuality standards in the Book of Discipline. It would offer a \$200,000 grant to annual conferences that want to leave the denomination because of disagreement over LGBTQ issues.

– UM News Weekly Digest; Jan 18, 2019.

+ Committee rules 78 petitions 'in harmony' for GC2019.

Irving, Texas (UMNS) – Options for the looming special session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church have become clearer with a key panel's ruling on which legislative petitions can be considered.

The Committee on Reference decided all 48 petitions in the Commission on a Way Forward report – including those of the One Church, Traditional and Connectional Conference Plans – are “in harmony” with the Council of Bishops' call for the Feb. 23-26 legislative gathering in St. Louis. Another 30 petitions got the go-ahead, meaning 78 petitions total have been cleared for General Conference 2019, a gathering of the denomination's top legislative assembly aimed at helping The United Methodist Church stay unified despite deep conflict over homosexuality. Petitions outside the Way Forward report that deal with LGBTQ inclusion or exclusion in the church made the cut. So did petitions that would make it easier for local churches to exit the denomination. Two very different legislative alternatives, the Simple Plan and Modified Traditional Plan, survived. But petitions that would change the episcopacy and Judicial Council did not. A petition that would allow for dissolution of the denomination also was ruled out of harmony.

The reference committee, consisting of clergy and lay General Conference delegates from all jurisdictions and central conferences, met Jan. 11-12 at an airport hotel near Dallas. Committee members arrived at criteria for their decisions but acknowledged they were feeling their way through a...screening process. “We don't have a template for what we're doing,” said the Rev. Chuck Savage, committee chair, as the session got underway. He and 18 other committee members present decided to focus on relevance rather than the merits or constitutionality of petitions. “Everyone understood our task and went out of their way to ignore their own opinion about any piece of legislation and solely consider whether it was in harmony of the call,” said Lynn Caterson, a committee member from the Northeastern Jurisdiction.

Long tensions over the denomination's stance on homosexuality – including bans on same-sex unions and ordination of gay clergy – boiled over at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, causing open talk of schism. Delegates asked the Council of Bishops to lead the church through the crisis. The bishops appointed a Commission on a Way Forward. The commission's report last year included legislation for the One Church, Traditional and Connectional Conference Plans – three distinctly different options. Bishops also called for the special General Conference. Under church law, only petitions deemed in harmony with the stated call or purpose of the gathering can be considered at such a conference – unless two-thirds of the delegates vote to take up something else. The bishops issued a first call that was then revised to read: “The purpose of this special session of the General Conference shall be limited to receiving and acting upon a report from the Commission on a Way Forward based upon the recommendations of the Council of Bishops.”

The church's Judicial Council ruled last May that it was up to General Conference “to determine, in the first instance, through its committees, officers and presiders,” whether a petition is in harmony with the call. That decision allowed petitions outside the Way Forward Report to be considered in St. Louis – if those petitions were deemed in harmony.

The Commission on General Conference designated the reference committee for the important screening. Before a more typical General Conference, that committee works obscurely, assigning petitions to legislative committees and consolidating similar petitions. Not this time. “The history has been that the (response to) the Committee on Reference is, ‘Yeah, whatever.’ On this deal, folks are going to care deeply,” said the Rev. Morris Matthis, a committee member from the South Central Jurisdiction.

The committee quickly and unanimously decided that all petitions in the Way Forward report would go on to General Conference. And it agreed with the Rev. Gary Graves, General Conference secretary, that 34 petitions were invalid because of formatting, failure to address the Book of Discipline or other basic errors. Those petitions were not included in the *Advance Daily Christian Advocate*. Most of the committee's time was spent arriving at and applying criteria for the remaining 51 petitions. One more was declared invalid, 30 more in harmony and 20 out of harmony. The committee took into account whether petitions dealt with the same paragraphs of church law as those “opened” or addressed by the Way Forward report plans. Members also gave a green light to petitions directly concerned with LGBTQ inclusion or exclusion in the church and those seeking to correct or perfect petitions in the Way Forward report. “If it helps the plan, whichever plan, to perfect itself, then it should be considered,” said Rudolph Merab, a committee member from the West Africa Central Conference.

Both the Simple Plan, which removes restrictions against same-sex unions and ordination of gay clergy, and Modified Traditional Plan were found to be in harmony. The Modified Traditional Plan is a revision of the Traditional Plan, which the Judicial Council found had several petitions that would need to be changed to avoid violating the church constitution. Those plans are backed by church groups that favor keeping the restrictions against same-sex unions and ordination of gay clergy, as well as boosting enforcement against violations. The reference committee also cleared for consideration in St. Louis petitions that would ease the way for churches to leave the denomination and retain their property.

A petition that would allow for the dissolution of the denomination was found out of harmony, with reference committee members concluding that the Way Forward report and its plans were focused on continuing The United

Methodist Church. “I feel like dissolving the whole United Methodist Church is a million miles away from where we started,” Matthis said. Petitions that sought reforms in the episcopacy were among those the committee found insufficiently related to the Commission on a Way Forward’s work to be in harmony, as were some dealing with restructuring the church. “If they had wanted to address the election of bishops in the commission, they would have presented petitions dealing with the election of bishops,” Caterson said.

More than one committee member noted that a scheduled General Conference, without the restricted focus of the special General Conference, is set for 2020. Any petitions rejected as not in harmony could be resubmitted for 2020.

The Commission on General Conference has already announced that delegates will operate as one legislative committee in St. Louis. The petitions that will be going to the special General Conference are required to get a vote in legislative committee, according to a 2016 provision in the Book of Discipline. The commission is expected to announce soon further details about how petitions will be processed.

The reference committee voted unanimously on nearly every decision. Though discussions were intense, civility never flagged and there was tension-puncturing laughter along the way.

Members celebrated communion and hugged at the end. “It’s amazing to me what happens when the Holy Spirit shows up,” said Savage, in concluding remarks as chair. “There are a lot of diverse opinions in this room, but I just want to say congratulations and thank you for the work that’s been done.”

[Note: Both the Simple Plan and Modified Traditional Plan were new plans added to the mix. – AOM]

– By Sam Hodges, United Methodist News Service (UMNS); Jan. 13, 2019, as reported in UMNS Weekly Digest; Jan 18.

+ ***What The Discipline says.*** The United Methodist Book of Discipline (BOD) states that: The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church. Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches. [Note: The BOD leads off with “while recognizing that all persons are of sacred worth...” – a very compassionate introduction. – AOM]

– UM News Weekly Digest; Jan 18, 2019.

+ ***Simple Plan supporters talk strategy.***

Madison, N.J. Supporters of the Simple Plan acknowledge the legislation faces long odds at the special General Conference next month. Still, they hope the plan – which removes all church restrictions related to homosexuality – will help shape the denomination’s way forward. “We don’t have the votes right now,” said the Rev. Austin L. Adkinson, one of the main drafters of the plan submitted on behalf of the unofficial United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus. But, he added, the plan is still part of the conversation. “We’re trying to pull people forward and trying to meet some people where they are.” Adkinson was one of the speakers at a Jan. 12 meeting that brought nearly 40 advocates for LGBTQ equality to United Methodist Drew University Theological School. They came to learn more about the Simple Plan and talk strategy ahead of the Feb. 23-26 legislative assembly in St. Louis.

– By Heather Hahn, UMNS; Jan. 15, 2019.

+ ***Opinions still vary on the Way Forward.***

Nashville, Tenn. – Many United Methodists are hoping a clear direction on how the church relates to homosexuality will emerge at the special called session of the General Conference in February. Important stakeholders are claiming their positions, including some who make preserving unity in the church a priority. “The hope is that ... we’ve created enough urgency in the system to get us unstuck,” said the Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, chief connectional ministries officer at the Connectional Table. “Now getting unstuck might also be really hard and really painful. ...”

Delegates to the Feb. 23-26 gathering in St. Louis will consider plans to deal with the status of “LGBTQ United Methodists,” who want “equal treatment” when it comes to ordination and marriage. The UM Book of Discipline states that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” cannot be clergy. The Discipline also bans ceremonies that celebrate same-sex unions in United Methodist churches. Despite these rules, same-gender weddings have been performed in United Methodist churches and by United Methodist clergy. Clergy have publicly declared they are gay, sometimes losing their credentials. “It seems like it’s no longer possible for us to live together in one body,” said the Rev. Tom Lambrecht. “Between those who are adamantly promoting the affirmation of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ ordination and those of us who believe that is contrary to Scripture, it doesn’t seem like there’s a middle ground or a compromise point that will satisfy people.”

The Council of Bishops said in recommending the One Church Plan that it provides conferences, churches and pastors the flexibility to pursue their mission while retaining the connectional nature of the church. The plan leaves decisions of

whether to allow same-gender weddings up to local churches and gay ordination up to annual conferences. “The question is, ‘Can we continue to be a one church denomination which allows us to have ministry in Liberia and the Philippines and in Europe and in the United States?’” said Bishop Kenneth H. Carter Jr., president of the Council of Bishops. “We are not a small denomination with one ethnicity, with one political perspective, with one theological perspective. We’re a global church on four continents. And what is compelling to me about the One Church Plan is that it does create a home for the people who are now in The United Methodist Church.”

Most African United Methodists favor the Traditional Plan, said the Rev. Forbes Matonga, pastor-in-charge at Nyadire Mission Centre in Zimbabwe and a delegate to the February special session. The plan maintains the current disciplinary language on homosexuality and strengthens enforcement. Matonga is also a leader in the Wesleyan Covenant Association, an unofficial group that advocates the traditionalist perspective. “This plan is consistent with what is culturally acceptable in most African countries,” Matonga said. “So any plan that proposes to authorize the practice of homosexuality either explicitly or discretely is unacceptable to us.” According to Amnesty International, homosexuality is illegal in 36 African countries and legal in 19. Endorsers of the Traditional Plan include the Estonia Conference and the North Central Jurisdiction Hispanic Caucus. The South Georgia Conference passed a resolution affirming the present Disciplinary language on homosexuality. At a gathering of the Africa Initiative, an unofficial advocacy group, speakers offered support for the Traditional Plan. The Texas Conference delegates voted to endorse the Traditional Plan. Of those present and voting at a delegate meeting, 15 voted for the plan, eight opposed and two abstained. And while the African bishops have not endorsed a plan, saying that is up to General Conference delegates, they did unanimously reaffirm their view that marriage is between one man and one woman and vow to “maintain the unity” of the church. The North Central Jurisdiction Hispanic Caucus said in its endorsement of the Traditional Plan that it would maintain biblical standards to be welcoming while keeping the current bans on homosexuality, as well as other forms of extramarital sex.

The Modified Traditional Plan beefs up enforcement against bishops who violate the Book of Discipline and includes \$200,000 grants for annual conferences who wish to leave the denomination over the issue of homosexuality. “Some of us felt that (the Traditional Plan) needed to be more complete than it was, especially the whole accountability issue,” said the Rev. Maxie Dunnam, minister-at-large at Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis. “We felt that ... needed to be clarified more.” Some modified plan advocates are also supportive of the original Traditional Plan. And others want the Traditional Plan modified in different ways than the changes added by the Modified Traditional Plan. It is unfortunate that going back to the drawing board to hammer out a new plan garnering broader support isn’t likely, according to the Rev. Chris Ritter, pastor of a multi-site ministry in Illinois that includes Geneseo First United Methodist Church and Cambridge United Methodist Church. Ritter, also a leader in the Wesleyan Covenant Association, thinks some common ground might be possible between the One Church and Traditional plans. “The fact that legislation deadlines have passed and camps have formed around the existing plans has unfortunately limited the continued creativity of our church,” Ritter said on his blog, People Need Jesus.

Others perceive the divide as too great for effective compromise. “It’s time to stop fighting,” said the Rev. Rob Renfro, president and publisher of Good News. “We have good people on both sides. We see things very differently. We’re never going to convince each other that we’re right and they’re wrong. ... “Let’s say, ‘You go your way. Let us go our way. We’ll see who God blesses, maybe both of us.’ But we don’t need to do this to each other any longer.”

Among those supporting the One Church Plan are the Council of Bishops, the Alaska Conference, the Western Jurisdiction, the Baltimore-Washington Conference, the Northern Illinois Conference, Uniting Methodists, the National Association of Filipino American United Methodists and Methodists Associated Representing the Cause of Hispanic/Latino Americans. Uniting Methodists, an unofficial group formed in 2017 to promote unity in the church, also has endorsed the plan and is working for its passage. And the Rev. Mark Holland, a Great Plains clergy delegate to General Conference, formed Mainstream UMC to work for passage of the One Church Plan. The Rev. Tom Berlin, lead pastor of Floris United Methodist Church in Herndon, Virginia, was a member of the Commission on a Way Forward and submitted the One Church Plan legislation to the General Conference. He likes the One Church Plan because it would let Africans and other traditionalist United Methodists do what they feel is right within their culture and context. “I support the One Church Plan because I believe we live in a broad and diverse denomination that needs room to exercise a variety of options,” Berlin said. “Being United Methodist has never meant that I have to agree with every single person in the congregation on every single thing.” United Methodists have the right to reflect theologically through use of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, the Alaska Conference said in a statement. “Because of this, we are likely to come up with different answers to the same question because of differences in our contexts and experience. The One Church Plan acknowledges those differences and allows for freedom in our conclusions.”

The Simple Plan, which calls for removal of the language in the Book of Discipline that excludes LGBTQ people from full participation in the church, is proposed by the unofficial United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus. “The United Methodist Church can choose to remove the restrictive language from our Book of Discipline without forcing the hand of those who are still wrestling with the idea of the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the church,” the caucus said in a statement. “(It) does not require any United Methodist clergy to perform a same-gender wedding. Individual congregations would be allowed to continue in their own discernment.”

The Connectional Conference Plan lacks endorsements and the United Methodist Judicial Council did not rule on its constitutionality when it considered the three plans in the Way Forward report. The council said it has no authority to scrutinize that plan because it would require several constitutional amendments.

Some United Methodist organizations are stressing the importance of keeping the denomination whole. The Northern Illinois Conference quotes Methodist founder John Wesley’s sermon “On Schism” to make this point. “It is the nature of love to unite us together; and the greater the love, the stricter the union,” Wesley said. “Nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren.”

The unofficial group Reconciling Ministries Network, which seeks equality of LGBTQ Christians, is not endorsing any of the plans. “It is with this humility that Reconciling Ministries Network will work continuously within Church structures to fully invite, welcome, and celebrate LGBTQ+ people in the life and leadership of our beloved Church,” the RMN said in a statement. “We remain committed to the work of adopting legislation that ends oppression as well as the ongoing journey toward doing no harm, doing all the good we can, and loving God.”

Although the issue of homosexuality in the church is important, other challenges are arguably more pressing, said Urs Schweizer, assistant to Bishop Patrick Streiff in central and southern Europe. Among those issues are sharing faith in post-modern and highly secularized societies, migration, breakdown of families, consumer society and poverty. “The most important aim (at the special session) is to find a way that does not create winners and losers, does not allow some to stay in the United Methodist Church while encouraging others to leave,” Schweizer said. “Many United Methodists in central and southern Europe would rather focus on staying together as one church, as diverse as we may be on some ethical issues.” [Note: I’d like to know what “challenges” are “more pressing” than sin, salvation, and integrity? – AOM]

– By Jim Patterson, UMNS; Dec. 10, 2018. Patterson is a UMNS reporter in Nashville, Tennessee.

+ *Council of Bishops’ letter to the global LGBTQ community.*

To the People of the United Methodist Church:

Grace and Peace to you in these days of Christmas, and at the conclusion of a calendar year.

At the fall meeting of the Council of Bishops at St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, bishops approved a motion to send a pastoral letter to the Global LGBTQ community. A writing team, composed of a bishop from each central conference and jurisdiction, completed this task, on behalf of the Council. The letter follows.

We share this letter with you as an expression of our desire to strengthen the body of Christ. We confess our participation in the harm we have done to one another and to the LGBTQ community. In offering this letter we bear witness to the light of Jesus Christ, which enlightens everyone and is coming into the world (John 1: 9). And we pray that in the days ahead we will, with him, grow and become strong, that we will be filled with wisdom, and that the favor of God will rest upon us (Luke 2: 40).

The peace of the Lord,

Ken Carter

Resident Bishop, Florida Conference President, Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church

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December 28, 2018

To our Global LGBTQ Kin in Christ,

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church recognizes the ways in which the convening of the Special Session of General Conference creates a time and space of harm for you and members of your family. To be the focus of attention, discussion and debate is hurtful.

Demaneing and dehumanizing comments and attacks on LGBTQ persons in conversations related to the upcoming February Conference are a great tragedy and do violence to hearts, minds, and spirits. When you suffer, the whole body of Christ suffers. Together, we need to work to resist hate, violence, and oppression of persons. In these attitudes and actions, great harm is done throughout the community, to the offended and the offender....

As leaders of the church, we are brokenhearted by conversations that dishonor, objectify and dehumanize. We confess, as Bishops of The United Methodist Church and as we attempt to honor our convictions, that our actions and words have not always been life-giving or honoring of the LGBTQ community....

– Rev. Dr. Maidstone Mulenga, UMNS, Director of Communications – Council of Bishops; December 28, 2018.

+ ***A Modest Way Forward.*** Despite fundamental disagreements over sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and ordination standards, many United Methodists do agree on some things related to the debate.

* First, many acknowledge differences on these matters are irreconcilable. Despite nearly a half-century of roundtable discussions, major studies, debates, and votes at scores of annual, jurisdictional, central, and General Conferences, no resolution has been reached. And regrettably, it is unlikely any genuine resolution will be reached at the special General Conference in late February. No one will be able to claim a mandate for the future direction of the denomination if the votes are as close as many anticipate.

* Second, many United Methodists are also willing to agree the debate has sometimes become so shrill and divisive that it has attracted the unwanted attention of local and national media outlets. No matter where United Methodists stand on the issues, they regret the wider culture's perception of their church as one that is fractious and dysfunctional.

* And finally, many United Methodists in the U.S. acknowledge the debate has contributed to a steady decline in membership, an alarming drop in average worship attendance (approximately 900,000 since the turn of the century), and significant financial challenges for annual conferences and the general church (a proposed 18 percent cut in the general church budget).

Building on agreement around these observations, the 864 delegates set to meet at the special called General Conference in St. Louis should, at a minimum, reach consensus around one modest proposal: pass a petition allowing local churches to exit the denomination with their property and assets less any liabilities they owe to their annual conference (e.g., unfunded pension obligations, outstanding loan payments). Such a path would allow churches most committed to a specific perspective and most invested in a particular resolution to withdraw from the conflict in order to follow their own deeply held convictions.

For instance, staunchly traditionalist congregations in predominantly centrist to progressive U.S. annual conferences would entertain the option. It is typically in these annual conferences where a handful of progressive clergy defy the church's teachings, where traditionalists respond by filing complaints, and where a bishop has been either unwilling or unable to hold the defiant accountable. Since the lack of accountability does not actually change the church's teachings, progressives' ultimate goals remain unfulfilled, and traditionalists feel betrayed by the lack of accountability to what they regard as some of the church's core teachings and ethical standards. And of course everyone regrets the distraction of handling complaints, holding church trials, and all the expense and negative publicity that come with them. It is no wonder these annual conferences are experiencing the largest rates of decline in average worship attendance; to both insiders and outsiders they appear, like the general church, perpetually locked in conflict. Were these centrist and progressive annual conferences willing to offer fair exit terms to traditionalist local churches, it would diminish a good deal of the divisiveness not only in their conferences, but also across the entire connection. The same would be true for progressive congregations in traditional annual conferences that assert they are restricted in their mission by the church's teachings. Exits in these circumstances would go a long way to eliminating the conflict that has roiled the denomination for decades.

This is actually a reasonable and tested way forward for the whole church. In the past few years some annual conferences and local churches have reached accommodations allowing local churches to exit. By and large, these negotiated exits were as amicable as one could expect given the volatility of our present circumstances. Fair-minded bishops, pastors, and lay leaders have reached agreements where the exiting congregation departed with all its property and assets, and paid an exit fee that allowed the annual conference time to adjust to the loss of the local church's annual apportionment payments. These negotiated departures have avoided the expense and negative publicity of litigation in civil courts.

Admittedly, the passage of an exit provision alone would not immediately solve the long and acrimonious debate over the church's sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and ordination standards, but it would be a step in the right direction. Its passage would augment the stated goals of each of the major plans coming before the special General Conference. To its credit, the Modified Traditional Plan acknowledges this by including a gracious exit provision. For One Church Plan proponents, who want peace and comity, an exit provision would actually go a long way to achieving their goal. The exit provision is a modest proposal that does not undermine any of the plans, and in fact would aid in the implementation of which ever one passed.

Thankfully, the Commission on General Conference's Committee on Reference has ruled that a number of exit petitions are properly before the special General Conference. Therefore, delegates will have several options to choose from. Most are straightforward, require only a majority of delegates to pass them, and are fairly easy to implement.

A courageous group of clergy and laity in the West Ohio Conference addressed the need for an exit provision this past September. They acknowledged significant differences of opinions with one another, and yet they managed to agree that after nearly 50 years of debate, divisiveness, and decline, it is time for the UM Church to give local congregations the freedom to exit. Some of the original signers are earnest advocates for the One Church Plan, or the Modified Traditional Plan, or other proposals, but they all agree that no matter what plan is adopted the General Conference delegates should pass a fair exit provision. Nearly two thousand people have added their names to this call for an exit path; it is still open for additional signatures.

The special General Conference gives the UM Church the opportunity to act with some modesty and humility. It can acknowledge that it is not the church, and therefore allowing some of its local congregations to depart is hardly on par with the great schism between East and West in the Middle Ages. The delegates can help us admit Christian denominations sometimes have irreconcilable differences, and sometimes the best way to acknowledge them is to allow some local churches to exit as fairly as possible.

To be sure, departures would be regrettable, but they need not be fatal to the UM Church, and they certainly would not be to the church universal. However, as things now stand, the UM Church's internal conflicts are not only undermining its own health and vitality, they are also contributing to the diminishment of the greater church in the U.S. and Europe at a time when it can ill afford it. The UM Church's fractional and fictional unity is doing more harm to the church catholic than any self-sorting among its local congregations would do. A modest exit would allow like-minded local churches of whatever stripe to band together and be about their missional aims as they discern them.

Contact your delegates to the General Conference and graciously note your support for a fair exit. It is time, in a spirit of grace and peace, to bring our long and weary debate to an end.

– By Walter Fenton, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Jan 18, 2019. Rev. Fenton is the WCA vice president for strategic engagement.

+ *One Church Plan is “formula for chaos”!*

Lancaster, Pa. – The Rev. Joseph F. DiPaolo, a 2019 General Conference delegate, argues that the One Church Plan will merely shift denominational conflict over homosexuality to local churches. He sees other major problems with the plan. “It is a formula for chaos, conflict and accelerated decline,” he wrote in an essay. [Note: I very much agree. – AOM]

– UM News Weekly Digest; Jan 18, 2019.

+ *Dunnam: Modified Traditional Plan aims for accountability.*

Atlanta (UMNS) – The Rev. Maxie Dunnam, president emeritus of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, submitted the Modified Traditional Plan to be considered by the 2019 special General Conference. Dunnam spoke with UM News as part of “Seeing a Way Forward” – a video series featuring different perspectives of church leaders on the work of the Commission on a Way Forward. [Note: He contends that it strives for accountability. I would agree. – AOM]

– UM News Weekly Digest; Jan 18, 2019.

Abortion, Assisted Suicide, Euthanasia & Other Life Issues.

+ *Bishop Extols Pro-Life Message in Capitol Hill Methodist Building.* As marchers outside joined the annual March for Life to the Supreme Court, retired Bishop Timothy Whitaker extolled Christian pro-life teaching at the annual Lifewatch service at the Capitol Hill United Methodist Building. “This march is more than a protest against destroying the lives of unborn children,” Whitaker said. “It is a festival for celebrating the gift of life and for remembering that every human being who is conceived is irreplaceable and deserves protection by the state and care from his or her community.”

Whitaker was introduced by United Methodist pastor Paul Stallsworth, who heads Lifewatch, the church's unofficial pro-life caucus. He noted his group's frequent disagreement with the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, owner of the United Methodist Building. But he also appreciatively introduced that board's general secretary, Susan Henry Crowe, who briefly shared her agency's greetings. United Methodism's official lobby agency has historically defended abortion rights even as the denomination is heading in a pro-life direction, revoking its previous support for Roe v. Wade in 2016.

Whitaker was perhaps the first United Methodist bishop in recent decades to articulate pro-life advocacy when he addressed Lifewatch in 2005. This year he again spoke unequivocally. “Being a member of the church entails confessing certain beliefs and practicing certain behaviors, which explains Christians' revulsion against abortion and our public witness for life.” Whitaker said. “What makes the church stand out is that it defines itself as something different from the rest of the world, and that is why the church is loved by many as well as hated by many.”

Whitaker noted “there are people who are powerfully attracted to the church when the church offers them an alternative way of living in the world,” offering itself as “place of liberation and hope for those aspiring to live a more noble existence.” In a culture where lives are “degraded by the sexual revolution, which includes an affirmation of the moral horror of abortion,” the church “must run counter to culture rather than cozy up to culture.”

Describing the March for Life as part of St. Peter’s calling to proclaim the “mighty acts of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light,” Whitaker said God is the “source of life of all humankind” and wills that “everyone come to know the fullness of life which God intends, including the unborn.”

Whitaker warned of a “profound error” to think the church may have different doctrines and disciplines in different places and times, as Christian teaching has always been “transcultural.” The example of the early church is instructive, he said, citing opposition to abortion by Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras, Tertullian, and Origen. The Didache of the early church warned “you shall not murder a child by abortion, nor kill that which is begotten.” The Apostles taught both doctrine and discipline because the “truth that has been revealed to us is always a way and a life.”

Citing United Methodism’s current debate over sexuality, Whitaker said many church members are “desperate” to remain the “religion of the culture” and urge the church to adapt to the “values of the culture.” But the church cannot remain the church unless it is “continuous with the proclamation and tradition of the apostles.” In a post-Christendom era the church can no longer align with culture and must instead return to the countercultural example of the early church, as a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

– By Mark Tooley; January 18, 2019. The Institute on Religion & Democracy, 1023 15th Street NW, Ste. 601, Washington, DC 20005

+ **The March for Life in Washington, DC.** [In response to pictures I had posted to Facebook...] One guy with his left leg injured making the march with it on a “scooter” was part of a group that came from North Dakota. Another group with a Texas flag was from Houston. I met yet another group from Dallas, one from Montana, and one from Canada. I walked beside one lady who looked to be Chinese and seemed to be praying with her daughter in that language. There were a lot of people there who were praying in Spanish and groups of Koreans. Among all the people in a video I had taken, there was a guy in a wheelchair as he rolled by. One elderly lady seemed to labor with every step – but she made the march. My reaction was that the crowd this year seemed to be one of the largest that I’ve ever seen; the mainstream media reported that there were about “1000 people” – if they reported it at all, but estimates were that it was somewhere between 100,000 and 650,000 – which are more accurate figures.

I was especially touched by a mother and an adopted daughter, who had been conceived in rape; they held signs that said:

Mom: “My daughter’s birthmom chose ABORTION (except the ‘B’ was replaced by a ‘D’ and the ‘R’ was replaced by a ‘P’ to form the word ‘ADOPTION’). She is my HERO.”

Daughter: “My birthmom chose ABORTION (except the ‘B’ was replaced by a ‘D’ and the ‘R’ was replaced by a ‘P’ to form the word ‘ADOPTION’). She is my HERO.”

I never thought about it before but just changing those two letters in the word “abortion” transformed it into “adoption” – such a beautiful message! These two – mother and daughter – were such an inspiration.

– AOM, January 18, 2019.

+ **The March for Life – Confrontation with Covington Catholic High School students.** After the first news release depicting them as “taunting” an Indian, it was shown that the students themselves had been harassed. My experience with Roman Catholic kids is that they are invariably polite, clean-cut, intelligent, and positive. This reflects leftist media bias.

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The pen is mightier than the sword. – Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), in a play about Cardinal Richelieu; 1839.

Global Outlook

Anyone who thinks the pen is mightier than the sword has not been stabbed with both. – Lemony Snicket

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Haiti. I was shopping in Wal-Mart today. My ears perked up when I thought I heard someone speaking Haitian Creole. I slowly backed my cart up to see if I had heard correctly. Sure enough it was. I greeted them in Creole & thought they were going to faint. We had a great talk about us living in Haiti for 35 yrs. & here they are in Jacksonville (North Carolina). I could tell they missed their homeland & they asked me if I liked Haitian food. We talked about all the different foods we eat in Haiti. They were not from Cap-Haitian, but Aux Cayes (a town far from Cap.) I told them I

heard that was a beautiful city, but had never been there. What a blessing it was to be able to speak with them. I try to imagine living in a strange land & struggling to speak the language, then someone appears out of nowhere speaking English. It made my day & I think it made theirs too! – Dana Adams, American missionary to Haiti, Rehoboth Ministries.

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[With all the debate over building a wall on our southern border with Mexico] “Heaven has a wall, a gate and a strict immigration policy. Hell has open borders. Let that sink in.” – Posted by The Reverend John Warrener