

UNITED METHODISTS FACE UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Chris Ritter

CHRIS RITTER DESCRIBES THE ESCALATION OF DIVISIONS IN THE WORLD'S LARGEST METHODIST DENOMINATION

The United Methodist Church finds themselves in a season of sober negotiations. The 12.4-million-member global denomination, many believe, has arrived at a point of irreconcilable differences following a February 2019 General Conference in St. Louis. The traditional view of marriage and human sexuality was upheld with the help of the growing international representation. Vocal opposition to the vote among Progressives in America and Western Europe has caused even stalwart institutional voices to now admit the denomination cannot continue as currently configured.

The special called 2019 General Conference grew from a moment of crisis at the 2016 quadrennial General Conference when the rejection of liberalizing legislation sparked rumors of formal division. By a narrow vote, the body decided to table matters related to sexuality and to instruct the bishops to form a commission to bring back recommendations. The urgency of the situation was heightened by the post-General Conference election of Bishop Karen Oliveto, a lesbian clergy unanimously selected by the progressive Western Jurisdiction of the U.S. church.

The ideologically diverse 32-member 'Commission on a Way Forward' met for months and developed three models for solving the impasse. A Traditional Plan affirming the current positions of the church was initially left in draft form because of perceived lack of support among the bishops. Instead, the bishops offered their support to the 'One Church Plan' (OCP) which changed the definition of marriage to the union of 'two adults.' Modest protections were offered for traditionalist conferences and congregations that did not want to ordain practicing LGBTQ persons or perform same-sex weddings. A more ambitious 'Connectional Conference Plan' to restructure the church into three covenants relative to homosexuality failed to gain traction.

The Bishop's majority recommendation of the One Church Plan ultimately reached consensus only with the promise that the Traditional Plan would also be brought in full legislative form. African bishops seem to have insisted upon this. So General Conference 2019 convened with three primary plans for consideration amidst what was described as the most prayed-for United Methodist General Conference in history.

In spite of the high-profile support offered for the OCP, the Traditional Plan was approved by a 54% margin at the four-day global conference. Key to this victory was a coalition of Africans, U.S. Traditionalists, Filipinos, and Eastern

Europeans. Due to parliamentary delays from the floor, some measures were passed without the amendments required to make them constitutional. But the remaining components of the Traditional Plan comprised significant accountability to church teachings. These include prohibitions against bishops ordaining clergy that do not meet church standards, limits upon charges that can be summarily dismissed by bishops, and minimum sentences for performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.

FALLOUT

UMC-Next is designed as a foil to the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA), a traditionalist organization formed in the aftermath of GC2016. Rather than settle matters, General Conference 2019 served to expose long-standing divisions. Several conferences in the U.S. and Western Europe vowed defiance. Full-page ads were taken out in U.S. newspapers to apologize for the actions of the denomination. Some African conferences have experienced loss of financial partnerships in America.

Self-described Progressives and Centrists in the U.S. formed a coalition called UMC-Next at a meeting convened at United Methodist's largest congregation, the 22,000-member Church of the Resurrection in Kansas. Rev. Adam Hamilton, the church's founding pastor, has grown increasingly vocal about his support of same-sex marriage after moving from the

traditional position several years ago. The UMC-Next Group indicated by a 57% margin their desire to form a new denomination. The group ultimately decided, however, to stay in the church through the May 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis.

Using GC2019 as a galvanizing event, UMC-Next successfully elected more Progressive U.S. delegates to GC2020, touting a majority in all five U.S. jurisdictions of the church. They seem to have fallen slightly short, however, of the majority they need to overturn church positions.

UMC-Next is designed as a foil to the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA), a traditionalist organization formed in 2016 in the aftermath of GC2019. Keith Boyette, the organization's president, has grown WCA to representation in every region served by the global denomination. The position of WCA is that, given the post GC-2019 situation, there should be an official and equitable division of the United Methodist Church for the sake of mission. A book of Doctrine and Discipline is being developed that will serve as the template for the 'Next Methodism' that WCA envisions. Features of this Discipline include a stream-lined structure, more theological cohesion, and reframing the role of bishops as spiritual leaders instead of administrators.

WCA helps comprise the Renewal and Reform Coalition, a cadre of organizations aimed at restoring United Methodism to its biblical roots. Another group, the Africa Initiative, coordinates these renewal efforts with the growing African Church. Demographic trends indicate that Africans, already 40% of church membership, will one day represent a majority of votes in the General Conference. Less exposed to U.S. infighting, Africans generally favor preservation of the current institution and biblical reform. But dwindling numbers in the U.S. church make American evangelicals impatient for relief. Although they 'won' the vote at GC2019, they desire immediate freedom from entrenched institutional structures, open rebellion among clergy, and bishops who refuse to exercise accountability to the Discipline.

Progressive voices are organized through the work of the Love Your

Neighbor Coalition (LYNC). Member organizations include the Reconciling Ministries Network (an organization dedicated to full LGBTQ inclusion), Methodists in a New Direction (MIND), Black Methodists for Church Renewal, the Methodist Federation for Social Action, and the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus.

A new organization, UM-Forward, emerged from a May 18, 2019 summit and declares an agenda of liberation for 'Persons of Color, Queer and Trans people.' This group has recently distinguished themselves from other Progressives as avowed Liberationists. They issued a statement on August 28 sharply criticizing the both Centrists and the Reconciling Ministry Network for a perceived willingness to acquiesce to plans that allow the Traditional view to remain partially in effect in the UMC.

FAULTY FOUNDATIONS?

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The United Methodist Church was formed in 1968 as a merger between The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB), a smaller denomination with Pietist roots among German American populations. Forged at the height of the Ecumenical Movement, the young denomination emphasized a theological method over a fixed set of theological beliefs. Alongside the Methodist Articles of Faith and the EUB Confession of Faith, it placed 'Our Theological Task,' a statement enjoining Albert Outler's 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' of Scripture, Experience, Tradition, and Reason. The church would not be held together by doctrine but by a commitment to broad, generous principles drawn from these sources.

It did not take long for the deficiencies of 'Our Theological Task' to surface. Besides being not particularly Wesleyan, it failed to provide much doctrinal guidance. 1988 revisions clarified that Scripture is the primary source for Christian theology and not just a first among equals.

Further patches to the foundations of The United Methodist Church came in 2004 when 'making disciples of

Jesus Christ' was accepted as the denominational mission statement. The change was made with little fanfare, but this memorable biblical mandate became a much-needed tool to focus the work of the church. The phrase 'for the transformation of the world' was added in 2008 to satisfy concerns that the statement did not adequately capture the mandate to impact societal structures. The mission statement has competed with the 2001 UMC advertising slogan 'Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors' which some have used to place inclusion and diversity as the core principles of the denomination.

American United Methodism tends to be strongest numerically in those areas of the United States with a more traditional outlook. The entire Western Jurisdiction, covering a third of the nation, only has 300,000 members, compared to 2.6 million in the U.S. Southeast. Some of the more Progressive U.S. conferences are declining faster than their more traditional counterparts.

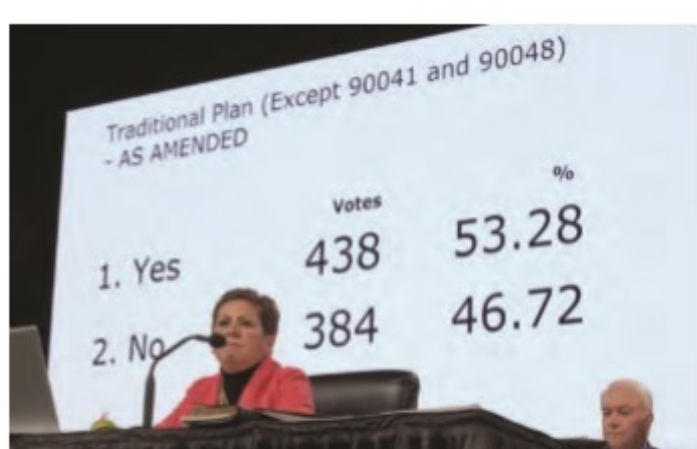
But perhaps the most significant force for reform has been the demographic explosion of the church in Africa. The UMC there is uniformly orthodox and culturally conservative in matters of marriage and human sexuality. In the last decade alone, one African Central Conference has jumped 329 percent. This is while membership in the U.S. and Europe has been on a fifty-year decline, losing five million members since the church's formation. Total African membership now stands at 4.9 million compared to the 7 million in the U.S. Efforts in 2008 to limit African influence in U.S. decision-making failed ratification.

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

Admitting the denomination needs to break up and accomplishing this are very different matters. The centralized system enconced in the Discipline makes structural change difficult. The general agencies of the United Methodist Church hold perhaps \$1.3 billion in assets and are under majority U.S. control. American annual conferences, the financial breadbasket of the denomination, hold significant assets and are often as divided ideologically as the denomination at large.

Of the \$6.3 billion in annual donations given through 44,000 congregations,

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Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey observes the results from a Feb. 26 vote for the Traditional Plan, which affirms the church's current bans on ordaining LGBTQ clergy and officiating at or hosting same-sex marriage. The vote came on the last day of the 2019 General Conference in St. Louis. Photo by Paul Jeffrey, UMNS.



Florida delegates Rachael Sumner (front left) and the Rev. Jacqueline Leveron (front right) of the Florida Conference join in prayer with bishops and other delegates at the front of the stage before a key vote on church policies about homosexuality during the 2019 United Methodist General Conference in St. Louis. Photo by Mike DuBose, UMNS.

perhaps something over \$100 million annually flows to work in the non-U.S. conferences. African conferences would disproportionately suffer if funding was abruptly ended. UM congregations currently hold net assets worth some \$65 billion and most of these are tied to the denomination through the historic trust clause. Other U.S. denominations, like the Episcopal Church, have spent millions of dollars in lawsuits over disputed properties following unsanctioned divisions over human sexuality and marriage.

GC2020 LOOMING LARGE

The fact that the GC2020 legislation deadline is September 18 of this year has triggered a flurry of behind-the-scenes activity over the summer months. Unlike the time leading up to GC2019, there is no single group mandated to surface solutions. Work is being done by ad hoc groups.

Bishop Yambasu of Sierra Leone has assembled a multi-lateral group in the U.S. for the purpose of ongoing dialog. UM-Forward, the liberationist group, has promised to bring their own plan, but the details have not yet been released. Attendees to the Africa Initiative's Prayer and Leadership Summit in Nairobi in August were briefed on the three plans that have emerged to date.

The Bard-Jones Plan was authored by two U.S. bishops, one Progressive and one Traditional. It calls for everyone to vacate the UMC by exiting into one of three new

denominations. The general agencies of the church would become autonomous non-profit organizations or be variously shared among the 'new expressions.' Only the General Council of Finance and Administration would be left to mop up any administrative and legal obligations left by the old denomination.

The UMC-Next group offered a plan that envisions Traditionalist congregations leaving with their properties intact to form a new denomination. Enforcement of restrictions against same-sex marriage would be halted. The remaining church would hold a special General Conference to officially remove the restrictions and re-organize for the future.

The 'Indianapolis Plan' comes from multilateral negotiations among a group comprised of Progressives, Centrists, and Traditionalists who believe it is time to end the conflict. This plan is still in draft form and envisions two or three new denominations being birthed by United Methodism. U.S. Centrists would inherit the institution after a fair division of resources. U.S. Traditionalists at the Indianapolis table are trying to secure institutional autonomy for themselves and a fair share of denominational assets for Africa.

A TIME OF DECISION

Amidst all the posturing and distress, hope remains among Evangelical United Methodists for a renewed Connection that can recover the 'spirit, doctrine, and discipline' with

which we first set out. The Wesleyan Covenant Association has received overtures from autonomous Methodist denominations in the Americas seeking greater international connection. Irish-born Billy Abraham, Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Dallas' Perkins School of Theology has written both of a 'Mexit' and the alternative possibility for United Methodism emerging as a 'unique, orthodox, global denomination.' The next few months should reveal which direction the United Methodist Church will go.

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