

A Protocol for Graceful Unity: The Overlapping Regional Conference Plan

A Search for an Alternative to the Protocol

Those who long for an alternative to separation and a spiritually revived and missionally alive global United Methodist Church now have hope for the future!

A year ago the United Methodist Church was stuck, with seemingly no way to escape the quagmire of differences concerning human sexuality. Some felt the church was actively seeking to hurt people by continuing its stance against gay marriage and ordination. Others felt they were being painted as bigots for simply wanting to uphold their understanding of the authority of Scripture. Still others felt caught in the middle.

In response, sixteen leaders utilized a mediation process that resulted in the “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation.” It proposed shaping the ongoing United Methodist Church as ‘progressive’ in matters involving LGBTQIA+ individuals, while also providing a way for those who embrace a more ‘traditional’ understanding of marriage and ordination to create a new expression of Methodism.

When the Protocol was released in early January 2020, conventional wisdom assumed it was the only viable option. Since then, however, United Methodists from the broad middle of the church - the ‘heart of Methodism’ that includes both those who lean ‘progressive’ and those who lean ‘traditional’ - have begun to embrace a new vision for the future of our church that offers an alternative to the Protocol.

They have concluded the Protocol’s proposed separation will not just divide the United Methodist Church into two churches, it will have a devastating impact. It will dramatically shrink churches because it leaves many United Methodists feeling that neither of the two options offers them a spiritual home. In turn, this will greatly reduce so much of the transforming work carried out in Jesus’ name that touches millions in the mission field.

These United Methodists do not believe this dismal trajectory is inevitable. They long for a United Methodist Church that provides a place for as many United Methodists as possible, while guaranteeing them defined space to live out their theological convictions. They hope for a global church that allows for contextual regional decision-making since the current *Book of Discipline* continues to be focused primarily on the United States. They yearn for a denomination that exhibits the power of Jesus Christ to unite people in a new way to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Quite simply, they want an alternative to the Protocol they fear will result in the death of the United Methodist Church they love. They want an alternative that realistically addresses the issues that exist, yet leaves room for as many United Methodists as possible. They want an alternative rooted in God's resurrection power to do amazing things with seemingly dead things by raising a spiritually revived and missionally alive global United Methodist Church. And they want this so much that they are willing to invest their time and effort to see it become a reality.

The Emerging and Converging of a New Vision

This dramatic shift is not the result of a campaign fostered by institutionalists fearfully trying to hold on to a dying church at all costs. It is taking place because these people do not believe this is the time to divide. Rather, it is the time to allow God to resurrect the 'heart of Methodism'.

Four noteworthy illustrations demonstrate how an emerging vision for the future of the United Methodist Church is converging globally.

First, the "Christmas Covenant," issued in December 2019 by Central Conference delegates, differs starkly from the currently proposed Protocol. It calls for the United Methodist Church to reject separation, be fully global, embrace enhanced regional decision-making, and build unity for the sake of mission,

We are stronger together. Being in mission together as a global church celebrates our unity in diversity and positively impacts the different contexts we represent. While

diversity is a challenge, we do not believe dissolution is the right way to heal the wounds that cause us pain as Christ's Body. A truly global church committed to be in mission together embraces its differences and allows for self-determination. It is able to find common ground in affirming how we do effective ministry in places we serve. Acknowledging that our different contexts need different solutions is a better way forward and fosters mutuality. This path affirms a stronger common witness to the global community. God's grace is present everywhere and in everyone. We are called to humbly respond to this grace in recognizing its many expressions around the world. This call we do best together. ("A Christmas Covenant: Our Gift of Hope" December 19, 2019)

Second, the unexpected pause brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has given United Methodists in the United States time to view the Protocol through a new set of lenses. And what they now see has caused them to realize that it does not best represent the future they long for. This is because they have rediscovered how much we need each other, the value of connectionalism, and how much they want to be part of a church that is truly global. In other words, they have learned how much they love being United Methodists!

Third, Bishop John Yambasu, who initiated the conversations leading to the Protocol, shared a paper entitled, "An Unexpected Pause," with the Council of Bishops Executive Committee just days before his death that advocated amending the current Protocol. In particular, he raised the possibility of creating two theologically distinct Overlapping Regional Conferences in the United States. This would enable the large number of moderate to more conservative United Methodists in the United States who want to remain in the denomination to do so without compromising their core convictions. It also would ensure the continued existence of the church in the United States with which Africans are more aligned theologically.

Fourth, the African College of Bishops issued a press release on October 30, 2020 stating that

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the currently proposed Protocol needs to be renegotiated because the anticipated post-separation make-up of the United Methodist Church in the United States leaves Africans in an untenable position:

The African bishops felt that the Protocol need (sic) to be renegotiated. As it stands now, the Protocol legislation provides for those in the Centrist track remaining as The United Methodist Church with the name as it is. The other

option is to join those whose voices are clear that they are set to begin a new church within the Wesleyan tradition.

Those who might not feel comfortable to remain with the branch of the United Methodist Church or to leave with those starting a new church are left in limbo. More of those in this category are the African United Methodists and others in the Central conferences as well as in the United States of America itself, the bishops noted. (Africa College of Bishops Press Release, October 30, 2020)

Integral to this emerging and converging vision for the future of our church is the conviction that unity matters because it matters to Jesus. He prays in John 17:20-24 that his followers may be one as he and God are one. To be sure, there are boundaries that must be maintained, which is why a common commitment to our Doctrinal Standards is an essential requirement for being part of the United Methodist Church. But abandoning our quest for unity is not an option. We must seek a new kind of unity that gracefully provides both space and connection; beginning now, and deepening in the years and decades to come. Indeed, modeling this new kind of unity may well turn out to be an important gift of hope to a dangerously fractured world.

The Catholic Church, with its myriad of orders and complexity of organization, offers a helpful illustration of how unity can be maintained in the midst of diversity and contextuality. Each order provides a 'safe space' for people to maintain their theological convictions. But each order is also part of something larger that unifies people across a wide range of contexts, theological understandings, missional endeavors, and polity. While it certainly does not fit neatly on an organizational chart, it does enable Jesus' disciples to avoid the sin of the church's witness being more about division than unity.

The Overlapping Regional Conference Plan

The Overlapping Regional Conference Plan has submitted proposed legislation to the General Conference that offers a concrete way of creating a spiritually revived and missionally alive global United Methodist Church.

It is not an attempt to replace the proposed Protocol that allows for new expressions of

Methodism to be created. Rather, it is an enhancement that addresses three current realities in our church in an adaptive and faithful way for the vast majority of United Methodists around the world who wish to remain in the church they love: 1) ours is a global church; 2) there is a growing need for contextualization to become part of our polity; and 3) deep division exists within our denomination.

The Plan proposes a United Methodist Church composed of two geographically overlapping and theologically distinct Regional Conferences in each of four Global Regions: the Philippines, Africa, Eurasia, and the United States.

One Regional Conference in each Global Region will be characterized by a commitment to the maintenance of the historic expression of the United Methodist Church's doctrinal and moral standards. The other will be characterized by an acceptance of the evolving nature of the historic expression of the United Methodist Church's doctrinal and moral standards. This provides clearly defined spaces for laity, congregations, pastors, and bishops to live out their theological convictions amid regional contextualization while keeping us connected as a global church committed to living into deeper unity in Christ.

The Philippines Central Conference will become the Philippines Global Region. The three Central Conferences in Africa will become the Africa Global Region. The three Central Conferences in Europe will become the Eurasia Global Region. The five Jurisdictional Conferences in the United States will become the United States Global Region.

The Overlapping Regional Conference Plan does not attempt to define the work and structure of the Regional Conferences. It enables the creation of a new way of being a global church that then will be shaped and formed within each Regional Conference. The roles and responsibilities of Annual Conferences, Regional Conferences, and the General Conference will reflect the contours of a spiritually revived and missionally alive global United Methodist Church that emerges in the coming years.

Annual Conferences

- Choose which Regional Conference in its Global Region to join
- Recruit, credential, deploy, and supervise clergy

- Begin new faith communities for new people
- Develop and carry out missional strategy
- Partner strategically with other Annual Conferences
- Develop lay leadership
- Appoint itinerant clergy through open itinerancy
- Elect delegates to the Regional Conference
- Elect delegates to the Global Conference
- Negotiate relationships with independent auxiliary boards and agencies as desired

Regional Conference

- Determine standards for marriage
- Determine requirements for ordination
- Relate to the Global Conference
- Collaborate with other Regional Conferences, including establishing formal structural relationships if desired
- Create a *Regional Conference Book of Discipline*
- Adopt Social Principles
- Determine roles and responsibilities for bishops
- Elect, deploy and support bishops, whose membership is in the Regional Conference College of Bishops
- Negotiate relationships with independent auxiliary boards and agencies as desired
- Provide a Regional Conference Judicial Court to address issues related to the Regional Conference in a Global Region

General Conference

- Pursue a deeper unity among all the Overlapping Regional Conferences within the United Methodist Church
- Create a “Global Book of Discipline” that focuses on doctrine, mission, and shared heritage
- Convene the Global Conference every four years to focus on unity, evangelism, mission, and ecumenical matters

- Maintain five General Boards and Agencies: Wespath; The General Commission on Finance and Administration; The General Commission on Archives and History; The Publishing House; The United Methodist Committee on Relief of the General Board of Global Ministries
- Support Africa University, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and other agreed-upon Global Church missional initiatives
- Create a Colloquy of Bishops from all Regional Conferences that will focus on discipleship formation, learning, shared mission, and unity in Christ
- Develop, sustain and nourish ecumenical relationships through the Colloquy of Bishops
- Provide a Global Church Judicial Council to address only those issues related to the Global United Methodist Church

Notes

- Churches that do not wish to be part of the Overlapping Regional Conference their Annual Conference chooses can switch by a simple majority vote.
- Clergy that do not wish to be part of the Overlapping Regional Conference their Annual Conference chooses can switch if they meet the requirements of the Overlapping Regional Conference they wish to join.
- There must be a minimum of 50 churches to constitute a Regional Conference
- Churches that do not wish to remain in the United Methodist Church will be able to gracefully exit the denomination.
- Most current boards and general agencies will become independent auxiliary boards and agencies
- Regional Conferences and their Annual Conferences can use the cross and flame, including its adaptation

Should the Overlapping Regional Conference Plan Become a Reality?

Should the United Methodist Church invest more time and spiritual energy on the Overlapping Regional Conference Plan when the Protocol seemingly solves a decades long conflict?

Some people do not think so.

There are those who contend that the Overlapping Regional Conference Plan is too complex to understand, too complicated to implement, and too late in coming because people are ready to go their separate ways to end the fighting. What is more, there already are whispered hints that those who support the “Protocol for Gracious Unity” are merely ‘institutionalists’; people who have so much at stake in the continuation of the United Methodist Church as is that they will do almost anything to ensure its survival so their place of privilege is preserved.

But here’s the reality. Increasing numbers of United Methodists who have assumed their beloved church had to divide are excited to discover there is an alternative that creates a place for them.

These are the people who sit each week in pews with all kinds of people with whom they do not agree. The disagreements are substantive and real. There are times when they will lead to conflict about important matters. But they choose to sit together because their love for Christ leads them to act differently, “As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” (1 Corinthians 12:20-21)

The United Methodist Church is at a watershed moment. We must choose whether we will give in to despair and divide, or whether we will witness to the world how the redeeming power of Jesus Christ can do far more than we can ever begin to imagine.

Of course there are uncertainties about the challenges to be faced, many of which are still unknown. No doubt, it will be messy at times. Sadly, there will be choices to make that people wish they did not have to make. Certainly, it will take longer than any of us would like. But in spite of all of this, one simple fact remains. We can make the Overlapping Regional Conference Plan a reality if we choose to do so because we are convinced God wants to resurrect us into a more spiritually revived and missionally alive global church.

Ultimately, it really is this simple.