

# Bishops, advocacy groups release plan to ‘gracefully split’ UMC; one plan of many



Logo by United Methodist Communications

By Jessica Brodie

A diverse group of United Methodists—including bishops, traditionalists, centrists and progressives—released a proposal Jan. 3 to gracefully split The United Methodist Church. The proposal is one of several to be considered by the General Conference.

Called the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation, the proposal would enable the UMC to be preserved while also allowing traditionalist churches to form a new denomination, plus get needed funding and keep their church properties.

Prominent mediator Kenneth Feinberg, who oversaw the government’s September 11th Victim Compensation Fund and the BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster Victim Compensation Fund, helped the 16-member group craft the proposal. While legislation for the proposal is still being developed, it is expected to be one of many plans up for consideration at the UMC’s General Conference, set for May 5-15 in Minneapolis.

The plan has the unanimous support of all the parties involved, including representatives from Europe, Africa, the Philippines and the United States, as well as many bishops and leaders of advocacy groups. Signers included representatives of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, The Confessing Movement, the Reconciling Ministries Network, UMCNext, Mainstream UMC, Uniting Methodists, Good News, the Methodist Federation for Social Action, the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus, Affirmation and The Institute on Religion & Democracy.

It also addresses many previously unresolved concerns. The plan allows conferences and local churches to vote to separate from the UMC and affiliate with new Methodist denominations created under the agreement within a certain time frame. Churches wishing to stay within the UMC would not be required to conduct a vote.

It anticipates the formation of a new traditionalist Methodist denomination, which would receive \$25 million over the next four years, retain assets and liabilities and give up further claim to the UMC’s assets.

An additional \$2 million would go to potential additional new Methodist denominations that may emerge.

It also allocates \$39 million to ensure there is no disruption in supporting ministries for communities historically marginalized by racism.

All current clergy and lay employees would keep their pensions regardless of the Methodist denomination they select.

As for the remaining global UMC, the plan proposes restructuring it into regions, with flexibility to adapt church policies, including on inclusion as it relates to sexuality. It also calls for a special general conference of the post-separation UMC with a purpose to create regional conferences, remove current prohibitions against LGBTQ persons and repeal the Traditional Plan.

“All of us are servants of the church and realize that we are not the primary decision makers on these matters,” said the Sierra Leone’s Bishop John Yambasu, speaking on behalf of the group. “Instead, we humbly offer to the delegates of the 2020 General Conference the work which we have accomplished in the hopes that it will help heal the harms and conflicts within the body of Christ and free us to be more effective witnesses to God’s Kingdom.”

Under the plan, a non-U.S. central conference would be able to choose with a two-thirds vote to affiliate with a new Methodist denomination. An annual conference also could vote to affiliate with a new Methodist denomination. A disaffiliation vote would have to pass by 57 percent.

Though the petition deadline for General Conference is past, church rules allow for special annual conference sessions to consider submitting additional petitions, and the GC Committee on Reference also can allow late petitions.

The plan’s signatories have asked the Council of Bishops to request that the Judicial Council consider the constitutionality of the proposal before General Conference opens.

South Carolina Resident Bishop L. Jonathan Holston said the proposal is one of several that have been prepared for consideration by the General Conference.

“It is important to remember that the General Conference is the only body that can speak for the denomination and make changes to The Book of Discipline. At this point, no decisions have been made and none will be made until the General Conference meets May 5-15 in Minneapolis,” Holston said.

Holston invites South Carolina United Methodists to join him in prayer for the delegates to the General Conference who have been elected to make decisions about the future mission and ministry of the UMC.

“Keeping focused on our mission—making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world—must remain our priority. There are people who do not yet know the grace, love and mercy found through relationship with Jesus Christ, and we are called to share this good news,” Holston said.

Holston encouraged people to pray and earnestly seek God’s will in your life; to engage in discussions, conversations and debates in ways that honor God and allow the fruit of the Spirit to be made known, and to practice Methodism founder John Wesley’s Three Simple Rules (do all the good you can, do no harm and stay in love with God).

“May we carry on God’s good work here in South Carolina with the love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,” Holston added.

To read the nine-page Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation, visit <https://tinyurl.com/split-protocol>. To read FAQs developed to help people understand the proposal, visit <https://tinyurl.com/split-protocol-faqs>.

*Much information gleaned from “United Methodist Traditionalists, Centrists, Progressives and Bishops Sign Agreement Aimed at Separation,” released by the Council of Bishops Office on behalf of the Mediation Team members. “Diverse Leaders’ Group Offers Separation Plan,” by Sam Hodges for the United Methodist News Service, also helped.*