

## **The Untied Methodist Church:**

*A Modest Proposal For Separating The Church*

By: Gregory S. Neal

The type-o in the title of this article has long been a joke that has caused chuckles when it showed up in newspaper articles and church bulletins. Sadly, it's no longer a joke: the diverse threads of our beloved church have unraveled to the point that the ties that bind us have become fundamentally *untied*. I haven't always felt this way. I used to be one of those who argued that the progressive and conservative wings of the church needed the strengths of the other to be more effective in mission and ministry. While this may well have been true once upon a time, it is no longer true today. To put this simply: we can no longer live together. We have reached a point where the dysfunctional dynamics of our system cripple us, making it fundamentally impossible for us to engage in effective ministry together. This was made abundantly clear in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the 2019 called General Conference of the UMC. As a denomination, we are broken.

My purpose here is not to recount the reasons for the division, nor is it to fan the flames of animosity, but to offer a modest proposal for how we can expeditiously move toward formally dividing the UMC into at least two successor denominations that will allow both sides to live true to their social and theological convictions. My objective here is to project a pathway forward that will allow for a division that produces the least amount of disruption to mission and ministry at all levels of the church, while allowing the successor denominations to reform themselves for more effective ministry both separately and jointly.

### **The Proposal**

“There shall be annual conferences as the fundamental bodies of the Church...”

(¶ 11, *2016 Book of Discipline*)

“The annual conference is the basic body in the Church...”

(¶ 33, *2016 Book of Discipline*)

Both of these statements, found in the UMC's Constitution, provide us with our most important clue for how to move forward in dividing our denomination into two successor entities. While disaffiliation legislation was passed by the 2019 General Conference, and has been approved as constitutional by the Judicial Council, the functional and fiscal chaos that would result from 31+ thousand congregations disaffiliating from the whole would be disastrous. Our mission and ministry, as well as our financial viability, would be destroyed by such an occurrence. Rather than dividing the denomination at the congregational level, it makes more sense for the denomination to divide itself at the Annual Conference level.

To achieve this, the simplest course would be for the 2020 General Conference to pass a Constitutional amendment which explicitly suspends the Constitution and sets all Annual Conferences free to affiliate with one of the two new denominations which would subsequently be created. Such an amendment might read something like this:

Plan of Dissolution—All conflicting provisions of the Constitution and Book of Discipline are hereby suspended for the purpose of implementing a plan of dissolution. All Annual Conferences are recognized as being autonomous legal entities for the purpose of affiliating with one of the new denominational entities which will result from this division, one providing full inclusion for LGBTQ+ persons and the other maintaining the church's current teachings and provisions regarding the same. Provisions that do not conflict with the implementation of this plan shall continue in force until the termination of The United Methodist Church is declared. At the conclusion of the implementation process, all assets and liabilities of The United Methodist Church shall have been equitably divided among the two successor denominations, and The United Methodist Church shall cease to exist.<sup>1</sup>

Once this or a similar amendment has been passed by a two-thirds majority of the delegates to the 2020 General Conference, the Conference will then need to outline a process which will implement the division. While there are many variables that must be considered in establishing such a process, I have here outlined only a few of the more important elements. I have not yet drafted these in the form of General Conference legislation because there are many elements of the concept that are still in flux, and I believe that outlining them as I have here will make them easier to follow and adjust.

1. The amendment will need to be ratified by the requisite two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of members of all the annual conferences. The ratification process will need to be significantly expedited, with Annual Conference voting on the amendment to be completed within two (2) months of the close of the 2020 General Conference. This may require called special sessions of Annual Conferences (particularly outside of the United States) in order to meet this timeframe. In the event that the amendment does not obtain the ratification threshold in the global church but does within the United States, the US Annual Conferences and those outside the US which are in favor of the plan, should proceed as-if it had been affirmed; in this way, a failure to ratify the Amendment will not hold back those who feel the need to discontinue their membership in the connection.
2. Following the casting of their ratification vote, each Annual Conference will be required to determine the subsequent denomination with which they choose to affiliate: either the Conservative denomination or the Progressive/Moderate denomination. This will be determined by a majority vote, taken by secret ballot. If a Conference's vote is polarized to within 10% of the majority (i.e., a 60/40 split, or less), that Conference may elect to request division by its Jurisdictional Conference (per ¶ 40) so that each half may affiliate with the successor denomination of its choice. The Annual Conference may determine such a split prior to Jurisdictional Conference approval and vote accordingly for the alignment of churches and clergy.

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<sup>1</sup> This amendment borrows heavily from the Keith Boyette Amendment (Petition 90085 in the *2019 Advanced Daily Christian Advocate*), simplifying it while also defining the level at which the division will take place.

3. Each Annual Conference will then need to elect delegates to the convening General Conference of the denomination of their choice. The same number of delegates chosen for the 2020 General Conference should be sent to the convening General Conferences of the successor denominations. Going forward, each denomination will have to determine its own methods for apportioning representation.
4. The convening General Conferences for the successor denominations should be held no later than May 2021, with the specific time and place for each to be determined by the Commission on the General Conference before the close of the 2020 General Conference. It is recommended that expenditures for each be kept as minimal as possible and that, where possible, Methodist owned or related facilities (like Lake Junaluska or Africa University) be used.
5. If a congregation dissents from the decision of its Annual Conference regarding the denomination with which it will affiliate, it may indicate this by a two-thirds majority vote of its membership meeting in a Church Conference. If a two-thirds majority cannot be attained, the Church will remain within its Annual Conference. If the two-thirds majority threshold is attained, the Church will be transferred from its originating Annual Conference to the closest Annual Conference that is affiliating with the other denomination. The originating and receiving Conferences will be required to confirm this transfer, with the receiving Conference incorporating the transferring church within its organizational structure. All transfers will be implemented according to the calendar year, and apportionments will be reckoned accordingly. The deadline for completing cross-denominational transfers from one Conference to another shall be completed no later than December 31, 2022.
6. If clergy-members dissent from the decision of their Annual Conference regarding the denomination with which it will affiliate, they may request transfer to an Annual Conference affiliating with the other denomination. Transferring Clergy must meet the ordination standards of the receiving denomination in order to be transferred; apart from this limitation, however, the transfer of Conference membership and appointment within the receiving Conference will be conducted according to the current Disciplinary provisions at ¶ 347.1. Arrangements for conference transfers should be made by the sending and receiving Bishops in a timely manner so as to expedite the movement between denominations and minimize disruptions in ministry. In any event, every effort should be made to match clergy in need of transfer with Conferences in the target denomination where there is need for clergy. Cross-denominational transfers under these provisions should be at least arranged, if not completed, before the end of the quadrennium (December 31, 2024). After this date, the provisions for transfer of clergy across denominational lines will need to be determined by the successor denominations (perhaps taking as a model the provisions at ¶ 347.2 and/or ¶ 347.3).
7. In the event that churches and their pastors end up in different denominations and yet wish to continue with the current pastoral appointment, every effort should be made to facilitate the continuation of the appointment through consultation with the Bishop and cabinet of both Conferences and the church and pastor involved. The objective should be

to maintain as much stability, continuity, and viability in ministry as possible while also doing the least amount of harm to the persons and entities involved.

8. Retired and active Bishops will need to select the denomination in which they wish to place their membership, and active bishops within the United States will need to do so prior to the 2020 Jurisdictional Conference at which their next quadrennial appointment will be made. The Jurisdictional Episcopacy Committees will need to make every effort to ensure that bishops are matched to conferences that have elected to affiliate with the same successor denomination and that those bishops will be able to continue in episcopal ministry throughout the entirety of the transition.
9. In some Jurisdictions it may be necessary to limit elections to the episcopacy, and/or transfer bishops between Jurisdictions, in order to ensure that there are enough available episcopal appointments for the number of available active-duty bishops in each successor denomination. The 2020 Jurisdictional Conferences will have to be flexible and in close, direct communication with the other Jurisdictions so as to ensure that the process goes smoothly.
10. Clergy Pensions and Insurance will continue to be served by Wespath. The two denominations will need to work out a cooperating agreement regarding Wespath to adjudicate disagreements as agreeably as possible.

This is by no means a comprehensive list of the various issues that will need to be considered and provided for in the implementation of a denominational split; my purpose has been to focus upon the most obvious points that would need to be addressed through General Conference legislation.

In addition to the above, the following list of issues will need to be resolved between the two successor denominations. Some of these may well be addressed by the 2020 General Conference as part of a dissolution plan, while other parts may be better dealt with after the split has actually been achieved and the successor denominations have had a chance to start living into what it means to be autonomous.

- Recognition of ministerial orders and cross-denominational pastoral appointments between the two successor denominations should be encouraged when and where the clergy meet the ordination requirements of the other denomination.
- The degree to which the Publishing House might be shared between both denominations needs to be considered. While most of its functions may be able to be shared, separate imprints may become necessary to clarify those resources that are particular to each denomination (i.e., each will have its own Book of Discipline, and there may well be Confirmation Class and Sunday School literature specific to each).
- Funding for the operations of Discipleship Ministries should be shared throughout the period of transition, if not permanently. The many various resources consolidated and functioning through this Agency are broad enough to be applicable to both successor

denominations. Denominationally-specific needs could be facilitated by staff appointed by each denomination's General Conference for that purpose.

- Joint use of *The Hymnal* and *The Book of Worship* should probably be encouraged, with changes to both being the responsibility of Discipleship Ministries and the Publishing House as approved by the two denominations' General Conferences.
- Funding for the operations of the General Board of Global Ministries should be shared throughout the period of transition. One or both denominations might eventually wish to form their own missions organization, but too many vital ministries currently operate through GBGM to risk harming them during the church's division.
- The existing General Board of Church and Society will need to be either divided between the two denominations, or more likely wholly adopted by one.
- The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry will probably need to be divided between the two denominations, or replicated/reformed in one or the other. The existing Seminaries may wish to affiliate with one, or both, or neither of the two new denominations.
- There are many institutions which belong to the various Jurisdictions (e.g. The Lydia Patterson Institute in the SCJC and Lake Junaluska in the SEJC). These will need to be either transferred to corresponding bodies in the successor denominations, co-owned by both successor denominations in cooperative arrangements, granted independence, or some combination of the three.
- The subsequent denominations should be encouraged to maintain, to the fullest extent possible, roughly equivalent Doctrinal Standards, including: The Articles of Religion, the EUB Confession of Faith, the General Rules of the United Societies, Wesley's Standard Sermons and Notes on the New Testament.
- In order to facilitate amicable cooperation between the two denominations, when and where such cooperation is possible, it will probably behoove both General Conferences to develop an Interdenominational Cooperation Board to oversee much of the above.

All of the above, and many other matters, will have to be addressed if a split of the UMC is to be successful and implemented with the least amount of disruption to the mission and ministry of the church. While seemingly insurmountable, I do believe that all of it is achievable.

Some may challenge the idea that the Constitutional threshold can be achieved at any future General Conference. While I agree that achieving a two-thirds majority is a daunting proposition, on this particular issue I believe that it is attainable. Based upon the chatter in the blogosphere, it is my opinion that there is actually significant support from both the Progressive and Conservative wings of the church for a split of the kind I have articulated. For a long time the principle opponents to a split have been among the progressives, but with the result of the 2019 General Conference it would appear that this has changed.

In the writing of this article, I am much indebted the Rev. Keith Boyette's *Plan for the Dissolution of the United Methodist Church*, Petitions 90085 and 90086 in the 2019 *Advanced Daily Christian Advocate*. Rev. Boyette is the President of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and a long-time leader among the Evangelicals in The United Methodist Church. His plan, while more complex and comprehensive than mine – and inclusive of significantly complete enabling legislation – contains many of the basic ideas that I have articulated in my own proposal. If a recognized leader on the Evangelical side is willing to propose such a division of the church, with a true desire to see it through to the mutual benefit of all involved, then I believe something like this is certainly possible.