

A New Form of Unity  
A Way Forward Strategy 2019-2022  
Bishops David A. Bard and Scott J. Jones  
April 28, 2019

**Brief Analysis of Our Current Situation**

Responses to the passage of many petitions that comprised the Traditional Plan, and the subsequent Judicial Council rulings upholding approximately half the petitions passed, have been strong and diverse, from vigorous support for the legislation and a determination to strengthen it at the 2020 General Conference, along with a feeling that it is simply time for The United Methodist Church to move on, to intense dissent from the legislation along with indications that people may act in ways contrary to it. These responses reveal in stark terms the depth of division which exists within our denomination. What are the possibilities for moving into the future to address our division and the animosity which often accompanies it?

- Move into the future as we have lived in the recent past, relying on the legislative processes of General Conference to help us make needed change. This would likely lead to few changes to the Traditional Plan and thus continue the escalating cycle of more rules and more defiance thereby damaging our Wesleyan witness.
- One “group” or the other (progressives or traditionalists) simply decides to leave and start something new. This could be facilitated by a more defined gracious exit process which would need to be negotiated between groups representing differing sides of our disagreement.
- A “forced schism” either through countless judicial processes leading to the removal of progressive pastors and bishops and the disaffiliation of more progressive churches, or by massive resistance and disobedience by progressives which it would be hoped could lead to the withdrawal of traditional pastors and bishops and the disaffiliation of more traditional churches. Uncalculated damage could come from such a chaotic way forward. Planning Annual Conferences and General Church bodies would become extraordinarily difficult as resources are withheld or diverted to judicial processes. Intense, angry conflict would significantly damage our Wesleyan witness. The role of bishop would be consumed by conflict management and judicial processes.
- Begin with a vision of what we would like The United Methodist Church to look like in 2022 and negotiate a new unity, a new connectionalism, a new Methodism, an amicable separation, or a mutual blessing/parting of the ways, which creates more space between United Methodists who are not currently living well together.

**Vision: What do we want the United Methodist Church to look like in 2022?**

We envision a more vibrant and missionally effective Wesleyan movement that no longer spends significant energy debating questions of human sexuality and LGBTQ inclusion. To achieve this, we envision that the United Methodist Church will have no members in the United States in 2025 and that all current US members, clergy, congregations and bishops will join one of three self-governing churches. Whether there are two or three self-governing churches is a matter for further conversation.

- The three churches will be in full communion.
- All three churches may use the name “Methodist” but are not required to do so.

- All three churches may use the cross-and-flame logo but are not required to do so.
- We envision regular contact between leadership teams of the three churches to coordinate shared mission and cooperation.
- It is envisioned that bishops of all three churches will hold regular meetings on the pattern of the Pan-Methodist Bishops' gatherings.
- It is envisioned that all three churches will choose to belong to the World Methodist Council and the Pan-Methodist Commission.
- All three churches will share in the governance of the General Council on Finance and Administration, Wespeth, the United Methodist Publishing House, United Methodist Committee on Relief, and The General Commission on Archives and History with governance strength proportional to lay membership strength.
- Each of the three churches could be global with member conferences in Europe, North America and Asia.
- It is envisioned that continued support for Africa University and the Black College Fund will continue from all three churches.
- The assets of all other general agencies and the rights to the name "United Methodist" and the cross-and-flame logo will belong to the General Council on Finance and Administration. Assets will be divided and distributed to the three churches in proportion to the numerical strength of their lay membership. GCFA's governing Council membership will be proportional to the lay membership strength of each church. Each church will elect its own representatives to GCFA.
- Each church will have its own General Conference with complete freedom to change its originating *Book of Discipline* after 2020. The current constitution of the UMC will be adaptable by a majority vote of the first General Conference of each church.
- Each Church will select its own name. It will begin with the current *Book of Discipline* as modified by the following:
  - The Progressive Methodist Church Discipline will include the Simple Plan as presented in 2019. It might be that the Progressive and Open Methodist Church would be one group defined by the Simple Plan since there is nothing in that plan which would require a more traditional pastor to officiate at a wedding against her or his conscience.
  - The Open Methodist Church Discipline will include the One Church Plan as presented in 2019.
  - The Traditional Methodist Church Discipline will include the Traditional Plan as presented in 2019.
- After 2020 each church will hold a General Conference which will re-write its constitution by majority vote of the delegates. That conference will have the right to choose whether or not to have a constitution. Each church will have the right to amend its doctrinal statements, adopt a new constitution, set its own standards for church membership and ordination and all other matters of polity and doctrine.
- Each church will determine which seminaries are approved and how theological education, including M. Div. programs and Courses of Study will be organized and funded.
- Each church will decide on the election, assignment, duties and funding for its bishops.

**Roadmap: What steps are necessary to implement the vision for a New Form of Unity?**

The process for achieving this vision is most easily accomplished by using different pieces of legislation presented to the 2019 General Conference. The key is the proposal to allow US annual conferences to leave the denomination. It was contained in section 9 of petition 90041 of the Traditional Plan. This section of the petition was ruled constitutional by the Judicial Council. Because the petition died in the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, section 9 would need to be reintroduced and passed in 2020. Under this provision, when an annual conference decides to leave the denomination by majority vote, congregations and clergy who disagree with that choice are allowed to transfer conferences with their assets, thereby joining a different church.

The roadmap involves approval of key ideas at the General Conference of 2020. Following that, annual conferences worldwide would decide by majority vote which of three churches they will join: the Progressive Methodist Church, the Open Methodist Church or the Traditional Methodist Church. Congregations which wish to transfer conferences will be allowed to do so with all of their assets though agreement between the conference and the congregation for debts owed for past pension and health care benefits already or conference loans would need to be negotiated. Pension liabilities would be cared for.

To limit the acrimony in this transition, legislation suspending the paragraphs or portions thereof related to complaints against persons for officiating at same-sex weddings or for the consideration of LGBTQ persons for candidacy, licensing, commissioning and ordination beginning at the end of General Conference 2020 and continuing through the first General Conferences of the new churches would be part of the New Form of Unity legislation.

All of this could be accomplished with no constitutional amendments. However, clear agreements about details, including the assets and continuing ministries of all other general agencies would need to be agreed upon.

2019

July.....Agreement in principle by key stakeholders for New Form of Unity

August.....Petitions due to 2020 General Conference

2020

May .....General Conference approves New Form of Unity and provision for annual conferences in the US to leave the UMC

May to April 2021 .....Annual Conferences choose which church to affiliate with and local churches ask to change conferences if they so desire

2021

May to April 2022 .....Annual Conferences elect delegates to General Conferences

2022

Summer or Fall .....First General Conferences of the three new churches are held

¶ 2553. Disaffiliation of a Local Church Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality—

1. *Basis*-- Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the *Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.

2. *Time Limits*--The choice by a local church to disaffiliate with The United Methodist Church under this paragraph shall be made in sufficient time for the process for exiting the denomination to be complete prior to December 31, 2023. The provisions of ¶ 2553 expire on December 31, 2023 and shall not be used after that date.

3. *Decision Making Process*--The church conference shall be conducted in accordance with ¶ 248 and shall be held within one hundred twenty (120) days after the district superintendent calls for the church conference. In addition to the provisions of ¶ 246.8, special attention shall be made to give broad notice to the full professing membership of the local church regarding the time and place of a church conference called for this purpose and to use all means necessary, including electronic communication where possible, to communicate. The decision to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference.

4. *Process Following Decision to Disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church*--If the church conference votes to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church, the terms and conditions for that disaffiliation shall be established by the board of trustees of the applicable annual conference, with the advice of the cabinet, the annual conference treasurer, the annual conference benefits officer, the director of connectional ministries, and the annual conference chancellor. The terms and conditions, including the effective date of disaffiliation, shall be memorialized in a binding Disaffiliation Agreement between the annual conference and the trustees of the local church, acting on behalf of the members. That agreement must be consistent with the following provisions:

a) *Standard Terms of the Disaffiliation Agreement*. The General Council on Finance and Administration shall develop a standard form for Disaffiliation Agreements under this paragraph to protect The United Methodist Church as set forth in ¶ 807.9. The agreement shall include a recognition of the validity and applicability of ¶ 2501, notwithstanding the release of property therefrom. Annual conferences may develop additional standard terms that are not inconsistent with the standard form of this paragraph.

b) *Apportionments*. The local church shall pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of apportionments.

c) *Property*. A disaffiliating local church shall have the right to retain its real and personal, tangible and intangible property. All transfers of property shall be made prior to disaffiliation.

All costs for transfer of title or other legal work shall be borne by the disaffiliating local church.  
d) *Pension Liabilities*. The local church shall contribute withdrawal liability in an amount equal to its pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference. The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits shall determine the aggregate funding obligations of the annual conference using market factors similar to a commercial annuity provider, from which the annual conference will determine the local church's share.

e) *Other Liabilities.* The local church shall satisfy all other debts, loans, and liabilities, or assign and transfer them to its new entity, prior to disaffiliation.

f) *Payment Terms.* Payment shall occur prior to the effective date of departure.

g) *Disaffiliating Churches Continuing as Plan Sponsors of the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits Plans.* The United Methodist Church believes that a local church disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 shall continue to share common religious bonds and convictions with The United Methodist Church based on shared Wesleyan theology and tradition and Methodist roots, unless the local church expressly resolves to the contrary. As such, a local church disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 shall continue to be eligible to sponsor voluntary employee benefit plans through the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits under ¶ 1504.2, subject to the applicable terms and conditions of the plans.

h) Once the disaffiliating local church has reimbursed the applicable annual conference for all funds due under the agreement, and provided that there are no other outstanding liabilities or claims against The United Methodist Church as a result of the disaffiliation, in consideration of the provisions of this paragraph, the applicable annual conference shall release any claims that it may have under ¶ 2501 and other paragraphs of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* commonly referred to as the trust clause, or under the agreement.