

The 1GC2019 Delegate

January, 2019
Issue 3

~~Gracious Exit~~ *Gracious Staying*

The central question before the 2019 General Conference is not what you believe about homosexuality. The central question for every delegate is: “Are you willing to share a denomination with Christians who think differently than you?”

We already do. We all live with family members who share very different beliefs on this issue. We all serve in local churches with members who believe very differently—on a variety of issues. Our unity, as United Methodists, comes from our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The One Church Plan is the right next step for our church because it creates a way forward in our denomination that is gracious about staying together, not gracious about leaving.

The One Church Plan does not push anyone out of the church. Everyone is welcome. The central component of the One Church Plan is its protection and affirmation of the conscience of every member, every local church, every pastor, every annual conference, and every bishop. There is a gracious place for

everyone. There is no exit provision in the One Church Plan because there is room for everyone...even for those who are currently calling for schism.

The exit provisions in the Traditional Plan are not gracious. The Traditional Plan is a tool to decertify, divide, and disconnect faithful brothers and sisters in Christ from the church. Many who believe homosexuality is a sin have cringed at the mean-spirited proposals for punishment and eviction of all who disagree. Significantly, the Judicial Council unanimously ruled that 40% of the Traditional Plan is unconstitutional—including most of the exit provisions.

The Traditional Plan recreates the climate of 1844 when the church split over slavery. The Connectional Conference Plan (CCP) recreates an era of segregation. In 1939 we were reunited in name but still segregated by race. The CCP would re-segregate us by belief on a single issue.

The One Church Plan was endorsed by nearly 2/3 of our

Bishops and the Judicial Council ruled unanimously that it is constitutional (with 3 sentences slated for deletion.) The Council of Bishops did not endorse the Connectional Conference Plan. And they want nothing to do with the Traditional Plan or its “exit” provisions and asked the Commission on the Way Forward not to work on it. A few rogue, anonymous bishops wrote the Traditional Plan—and its “exit” provisions—and placed it in the appendix of the report.

The One Church Plan—forged by the Commission on the Way Forward, ratified by the Bishops, and upheld by the Judicial Council—creates a path towards a gracious staying in full community. This is the first time in the history of our church the General Conference requested leadership from the Council of Bishops to help us navigate through troubled waters. Now is the time for the General Conference Delegates to step forward and embrace the way forward we requested in 2016.

Delegates cannot allow one splinter group to set the agenda for General Conference, much less the future of the entire UMC. The “exit” provisions only benefit those who leave while negatively impacting the remaining church with potentially catastrophic implications for our Trust Clause, Pensions, and Global Ministries. We should not codify a splinter into our Book of Discipline.



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“In such a process of adjustment, the Discipline became not a book of definite rules, nor yet a formal code, but rather a record of the successive stages of spiritual insight attained by Methodists under the grace of Christ. We have therefore expected that the Discipline would be administered, not merely as a legal document, but as a revelation of the Holy Spirit working in and through our people.”

1944 United Methodist Book of Discipline, Episcopal Greetings

Quoted by Bishop Cynthia Harvey before the Judicial Council, October 2018

The three plans before the General Conference offer solutions from different eras.

Traditional Plan	Connectional Conference Plan	One Church Plan
<p>1844 Era of Civil War</p> <p>Then Created a Pro-Slavery Church and Anti-Slavery Church</p> <p>Now Split over one issue and Split Accelerated by Exit Provisions</p> <p><i>Traditional Plan Affirms Schism</i></p>	<p>1939 Era of Segregation</p> <p>Then White people in geographic jurisdictions and Black people segregated in “Central” Jurisdiction</p> <p>Now Segregated by one issue and Every Conference Must Vote on New Home</p> <p><i>CCP Affirms Segregation</i></p>	<p>1968 Era of Unification</p> <p>Then Brought denominations together and put the “United” in Methodism</p> <p>Now Holds the church together to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.</p> <p><i>One Church Plan Affirms Unity</i></p>



The Vision of the One Church Plan

“The United Methodist Church should not split. Nor should its leaders allow it to be torn apart. Taken as a whole, the New Testament is offering a vision of the church of Jesus Christ as embodying a visible unity while also characterized by diversity. Liberals need conservatives and conservatives need liberals. If one group leaves, we are all worse off.”

Bishop Scott Jones, *Staying at the Table*, 2008, pp. 3, 7, 21

All Discussion of “Exit” Should Be Postponed Until 2020

The General Conference Delegates voted in 2016 for the Bishops to lead us forward. That meant ALL of us. The Delegates did NOT vote for the Bishops to show us how to split. Discussion of schism or “exit plans,” before we even address the report from the Commission on the Way Forward, flies in the face of this request. How can we talk about exit without first acting on the report and giving unity a chance? The One Church Plan is an opportunity that has been forged with the prayers, hopes, and tears of the Commission on the Way Forward, guided by the Holy Spirit. It has been recommended by nearly 2/3 of the Bishops and upheld unanimously by the Judicial Council. It is the ONLY option that preserves the unity of the church for our collective mission and ministry.

Only a few are seeking to divide the church. Rev. Tom Lambrecht said recently on a United Methodist News Service video, “It is not possible for us to be in one denomination together.”¹ The Wesleyan Covenant Association has set their “convening conference” for their new denomination.² Rev. Keith Boyette presented a petition to the 2019 General Conference to dissolve the denomination.³ Rev. Chris Ritter draws maps where we are segregated by belief.⁴ For these individuals, schism is the only option. They say it so often, it starts to sound inevitable.

Schism is NOT inevitable. It is a choice by a few. The Commission on the Way Forward did NOT introduce the idea of “exit.” The “exit” provisions were introduced by the few rogue bishops who wrote the Traditional Plan. The agenda of General Conference 2019 must be dictated by the agenda of unity from the Commission on the Way Forward, not by the few who seek to divide the church.

Next Steps

The most important item on the agenda is for Delegates to pass the One Church Plan. This is the right thing to do for our church. Then, it is fair for the General Conference to refer any discussion about “exits” to the future. This could be referred directly to the 2020 General Conference. Or, if there is a desire for dialogue to take place prior to that, it could be referred to the Council of Bishops—our Executive Branch, or to the Connectional Table. It is very important that the Central Conferences are represented in these discussions because they could be severely harmed if an exit discussion does not include voices from around the world.

Any of these official entities could be in dialogue with any group that seeks to leave the denomination for a fair plan that respects a group’s desire to leave, while honoring pension liabilities and property issues. In the meantime, the Book of Discipline includes an exit plan that is already in use.

There is simply not time in an abbreviated four-day General Conference to craft thoughtful exit alternatives. The year in between can allow for a cooling off period which does not lead to rash decisions. The whole church deserves a prayerful, thoughtful process, not driven by a false, emotion-stoked “emergency” created by the few who seek schism. General Conference 2019 is about Gracious Staying.

¹ tinyurl.com/y86ktpx9

² <https://tinyurl.com/yc5aav2r>

³ tinyurl.com/yclg4amc

⁴ tinyurl.com/yaj5ewe3

The reality is that the UMC is not facing “schism” so much as “splinter” from one well organized group. Since the WCA is leaving regardless, it seems that it would be more credible if they simply negotiated with the church the terms of their departure. They could go do ministry in the world without pushing to reorganize the church they seek to leave behind.



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