

Living in God's Liberating Light — the Epiphany Statement

on the "Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation"

6 January 2020 — Epiphany



A public response from [UM-Forward](#) — a collective of United Methodist laity, clergy, and scholars who envision liberation, which is a posture toward the future, grounded in past struggle and present resilience that proclaims: we are loved into freedom.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you." (Isaiah 60:1)

We offer this response to the "Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation" because we believe in the importance of mutual accountability. Such witness is part of the holy work of discernment and "testing the spirits" (1 John 4:1). As siblings in Christ, we strive to embody the Gospel values of holiness, grace, and freedom — and sadly, this Protocol lacks integrity to these values. We recognize the hard work of many of the Protocol's authors, who struggled hard to make a positive difference, and we offer faith-full public critique and constructive recommendations. We testify to the holy boldness of openly and explicitly centering the experiences of marginalized and oppressed people and our claim to a more just and livable future.

The "Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation" was not drafted in the light. It is a back-room political negotiation that attempts to override the denomination's self-determination, while discarding core principles of justice, theological grounding, transparency, and representation of diversity — all in pursuit of product over process. **But process matters.** Ends are predetermined in means. "Mother wit" has long taught: "It's not *what you say, but how you say it.*"

How can we trust a proposal that redeploys the same tired strategies of secrecy and exclusion? Poor process reveals poor values and predicts what is in store in a post-separation UMC. **Because of this, we have no choice but to oppose this Protocol and invite a re-envisioning that centers integrity grounded in the expansive love of Christ.**

Seven Reasons United Methodists and General Conference Delegates Should Reject the "Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation"

1. ***It Lacks Gospel Truth and Theological Integrity*** — *The Protocol does not live into the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is characterized by unconditional love and liberty for all. As queer youth are bullied into suicide and trans women of color are murdered — tragedies linked to the homophobia, transphobia, racism, and misogyny inherent in our discriminatory polity and practices — the Church needs to do more than remove harmful language. The Gospel calls the Church to do good: to bind up the brokenhearted and set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Anything short of this calling is sinful and fails to embody our baptismal vows.*

2. **It Is Unjust** — Despite claims made by the authors of the Protocol that they have created a "fair and equitable solution that puts decades of conflict behind us" and that it offers "renewed hope to us all," the "solution" they offer is not equitable. And at what cost? For at least four decades, the group now known as the Wesleyan Covenant Association has systematically orchestrated this moment through deliberate actions which include: subverting the denomination by withholding funds, committing funds to the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and scapegoating LGBTQIA+ people and our allies. It is unjust to reward these actions with \$25 million to fund the traditionalist Methodist denomination, while only offering a consolation prize of \$2 million to be split among "potential additional Methodist denominations" (Article IV of the Protocol). If payment to the architects of anti-LGBTQIA+ oppression is the only way through this deadlock, then Methodist expressions that live into the fullness of God's liberating light should be recognized, supported, and not penalized for their years of hopeful ministry within the denomination.
3. **It Falls Short of Economic Justice** — The "traditionalists" can further boast a \$13 million contribution to the "reparations" fund (Article IV of the Protocol), without taking a single step toward repentance from oppressive practices. A commitment to reparations is not a one-time payment of a debt, but a first step in the process of repentance that may lead to reconciliation. This boosts the total of the "traditionalists'" entitled claim to \$38 million in UMC assets. This protocol is nothing short of a "purging plan" designed to reward "traditionalists" for leaving after years of withholding funds from the denomination and attacking LGBTQIA+ people, while leaving liberationists with crumbs.
4. **It Was Created in Secret** — A group of 16 selectively-appointed power players met in secret for months and released to the world a protocol of separation that divides the UMC. More often than not, secret meetings protect the powerful. Why should United Methodists and delegates to the 2020 General Conference trust the fruits of these meetings? To whom are the 16 signers accountable? What authority did they have to develop this "protocol?" While the Protocol has no binding authority, United Methodists should be suspicious of secret deals as a way forward.
5. **It Is Not Representative** — If the Protocol charts our course for an inclusive future for our denomination, then why didn't the group of 16 signers reflect that by including: anyone younger than the baby boomer generation, anyone with disabilities, any transgender people, more women, more queer people, laity from outside of the U.S., or more people of color? The Protocol's FAQ plainly admits that representation of racial/ethnic caucuses was not a priority. Since February 2019, there has been a significant movement of Methodists committed to liberation in the UMC, as described in the "[Loved and Liberated Proclamation](#)." Yet, no liberationists were invited to the table. Although framed as an attempt to avoid another GC2019, the Protocol repeats the same failed One Church Plan strategy: bishops brokering deals, making empty promises, and peddling false hope to those in the pews. And this time, like before, the Protocol erases the voices of those it claims to protect.
6. **It Undermines Democratic Conferencing** — The Protocol's authors frame it as a "gift" to the 2020 General Conference. While it is one plan, which is not yet submitted as legislation, we must see this for what it truly is: influential powers within the UMC attempting to preempt the authority of the General Conference. The Protocol attempts to set the agenda for 2020 General Conference in order to orchestrate its adoption (Article VI of the Protocol). Moreover, and perhaps most problematic, is that through this Protocol, some members of this selectively-appointed, non-representative group, which met in secret, now seek to leverage the Council of Bishops, the Commission on General Conference, the General Council on Finance and Administration, and the Judicial Council in order to direct the legislative process, thus preventing delegates from functioning in their duly-elected roles. If the General Conference alone can speak for the UMC, by what authority does this group take actions reserved for the General Conference?

7. ***It Is Not Liberation*** — *The Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that Liberation is a way of being in the world (John 8:36) — a posture toward the future, grounded in past struggle and present resilience that proclaims: we are loved into freedom. In the end, the Protocol is born of scarcity and moderation. Despite its name, the only place where reconciliation and grace show up is in the title. We must beware when terms of great theological significance are pasted onto political deals negotiated in secret. The Protocol selectively adopts single ideas and phrases of liberation (such as reparations), which are instantly undermined by the more prominent mechanisms of empire: secrecy, non-representation, and the consolidation by the few of power over the many. The liberative alternative — to choose to live into the freedom granted to us by the Gospel, proclaiming truth and setting the captives free, bearing together risk and loss — remains a choice for all of us.*

An Invitation to Claim a Liberative Process toward Justice

Epiphany is a season of illumination and liberation. The Christmas narrative tells us that the Magi, having been warned in a dream, chose a different way home (Matthew 2:1-12). With the Holy Family they left behind the slaughter of innocents perpetrated by an empire's abuse of power. Yet, the reign of empire is eclipsed by the birth of the Christ-child, the very incarnation of God's love. So too, we are called to choose the road away from harm and destruction — toward the home of liberation. This Epiphany, we have received dreams that inspire us to blaze this path toward justice, toward the shining hope of a radically inclusive church.

We agree with the Protocol that separation is inevitable, and we call the Church to commit to a liberative process to determine how separation will proceed. The 2020 General Conference should adopt a process to develop a Plan of Separation that prioritizes integrity, equity, transparency, representation, and accountability through a Transitional Council, as proposed in the [N.E.W. Plan](#):

1. ***Prioritize Gospel Truth and Theological Integrity*** — *Let us do the good of the Gospel for the sake of all people, especially the most marginalized and oppressed.*
2. ***Covenant to Restorative Justice and Equity*** — *Let us repent and pursue true reconciliation and healing to those injured through anti-LGBTQIA+ church policies, including cessation of complaints, restoration of credentials for defrocked clergy, and funding LGBTQIA+ empowering ministries.*
3. ***Commit to Economic Justice*** — *Let us begin to remedy past and present economic harm by investing meaningfully in the futures of those impacted by racism, colonialism, and oppression through a commitment to reparations.*
4. ***Ensure Transparency and Mutual Accountability*** — *Let us negotiate in the light and not do this challenging and holy work in secret.*
5. ***Provide for Fair Representation*** — *Let us develop a Plan of Separation with equitable representation of key constituencies in our connection.*
6. ***Safeguard Democratic Conferencing*** — *Let us respect the democratic process as we seek the transformative power of God's Spirit.*
7. ***Strive for Liberation*** — *Let us, above all, follow the prophetic witness of Isaiah as disciples of Jesus Christ, because the Spirit of the Liberating God is upon us.*

As those liberated by God's radical love, we cling to the truth of God's abundance. When we abandon our dreams of justice, there is death. We cannot settle for an institutional compromise that promises to remove condemnation (in a best case scenario), yet fails to affirm LGBTQIA+ persons and others not adequately represented in the process, in the life and leadership of the church. We are called to work for justice with integrity. We are called to do better, together. **Because we have been transformed by love, we are called to reflect the light of Jesus Christ, and we dare not hoard it.**

In Love and Liberation,

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