

Reflection from Bishop Jung on the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation

My sacred and beloved siblings in Christ, our Council of Bishops endorsed the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation proposal that offers an end to the current deep division in our United Methodist Church. I have mixed feelings about the proposal and what it means.

On the one hand, it not only recognizes our differences, but honors a very broad spectrum of beliefs, interpretations, visions, and desires for the church. Not everyone will be happy, but that has been part of our dilemma – there is no way forward that everyone will agree with or support. Our guidance to “Do No Harm,” comes to a place of doing the least harm possible in the short term, that we might do more good in the long term. The Protocol offers a way for moderate and progressive United Methodists to be in ministry in a fully inclusive church and for traditionalists to continue in a ministry that honors certain restrictions. This also recognizes that there is no healthy, adequate “one-size-fits-all” polity and doctrine for a wondrously diverse global church. We have arrived at a place where graceful autonomy is required for different regions of our planet to make decisions that allow for effective ministry and witness. The decisions most appropriate for The United Methodist Church in the United States are not appropriate for Africa, Russia, the Philippines, or other regions of our church. We progress, we evolve, we adapt at different levels, in different ways, at different times. In this case, unity has not been a strength. We are in a liminal space. Preparing to cross a threshold that marks a distinctive and drastic new chapter in the story of Methodism. The proposed Protocol invites us to shift our energies in significant ways. First, we cannot continue to treat members of our baptized fellowship as adversaries. The division that yields “us/them” thinking is doing no one any good. We are all in this together, “working out our own salvation with fear and trembling,” (Philippians 2:12), seeking a pathway that ceases to do harm to those with whom we disagree. If the mediation to this process tells us anything, it is that we must seek what is best for all and not just for those “on our side.” Second, we need to stop fighting over territory, property, and finances. All we possess and manage is God’s; if we separate, we must be willing to divide God’s assets in such a way that faithful stewardship may continue for all. Fighting over things will not take us to a positive future and will simply serve to damage our mission and ministry and provide a terrible witness to our world. Third, allowing a less-confrontational separation means that we stand a better chance of friendly transition. On our current course, we face the likelihood of irreparable damage and continued animosity. It is time for us to offer grace to all, to cease needless insult and injury, and to lay the groundwork for hope and healing.

On the other hand, we have failed to maintain a unity and an integrity. Relationships will change, we will experience the pain of losing loved ones, we will not see brothers, sisters, siblings, colleagues, and friends that are part of our family. The metaphor of divorce had been used in talking about the future of the church; the reality of such a step is painful, even when some see it as the only alternative. We will no longer be what we have been, who we have been. It has been very easy to focus on the ways being together has been difficult; now we will face the reality of losing all that has been good and gracious, wonderful and effective.

Transitions are always disruptive. Whether we are picking up the pieces and arranging

them in a new way or beginning from scratch to build something new, a lot of time, energy, resources, and focus are involved. It will be a challenge for us all to maintain a vision and commitment to do God's will, serve the church's mission, and offer a transformative ministry to all the world. But I believe we can make the necessary changes with love and grace if we make the commitment to celebrate the holistic kingdom of God as beloved community. We can do this whether we are together or working in new configurations, for we are still one in Christ Jesus.

In the coming months, as we process the Protocol for Separation and experience the decisions of the upcoming General Conference, our clergy and laity – and our communities of faith will be facing incredible and challenging choices. Who will stay and who will go? Who will leave all together and who will return? Not only "what will we do," but "how" will be ongoing discussions. In times of immense and all-encompassing change there is great fear and anxiety, as well as excitement and anticipation. As we journey together through this momentous time, I would ask of every Wisconsin United Methodist the following things.

Pray. Pray for the church and its leaders. Pray for your own congregation, but also for all the congregations that will be impacted by these decisions. Pray for grace in all our actions. Pray for The United Methodist Church as it moves forward and pray for the new Methodist denomination and affiliates that will emerge. Pray for our global church – for our ongoing work of social justice, world-wide missions, and evangelism and witness – that will require our commitment and support to stay strong and vital as we work out our polity and practices for a radically new and different church.

Talk. Beyond talking to God, talk to each other. It is my prayer that all congregations will create space and time for the community of faith to come together for conversation, prayer, discernment, and honest exploration. People will have many questions, and while we may not have clear, specific answers, it is important that everyone have opportunity to express themselves.

Be reflective, not reactive. Our entire culture in the United States is suffering a time of cynicism, skepticism, suspicion, and ascribing negative intent. Reactivity makes us look for problems, to key in on what we don't like and what we disagree with. We wonder about ulterior motives and hidden agendas. I ask us all to make a conscious effort to work together for good, to see possibilities, and to prepare for a grace-filled, kind and compassionate way forward. Yes, there has been great hurt, there are things that have been done and said that cannot be taken back. But by God's grace it is time to leave the past behind and work together for a future that truly honors and glorifies God, that can allow space for effective and faithful ministry for everyone along the theological spectrum, and that creates fertile soil for healing, redemption and resurrection.

Is the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation the answer we have been looking for? Well, there is no simple solution to a complex and dynamic problem, but it is a way forward that allows us to move beyond the destruction of our disagreement and division, it is a hope that we can do less harm and that we can do more good, and it is a tangible and concrete challenge for us to work together to create a better, stronger future. This is my hope.