



## GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE of The United Methodist Church

REV. DR. RUBEN SAENZ JR., *Resident Bishop*

1207 SW Executive Drive  
Topeka, KS 66615  
800-745-2350  
785-414-4299  
bishop@greatplainsumc.org

Brothers and sisters of the Great Plains Conference,

Jan. 12, 2020

May the peace and light of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ enfold and hold you today.

By now you have read or heard that a Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation (The Protocol) was released to the denomination on Friday, Jan. 3. The Protocol proposes the gracious and respectful separation between traditional and progressive Methodists as a faithful step forward.

The news of the proposal for our separation was reported by national news outlets and has sparked widespread conversations and many questions among Methodists, the broader church, and a watching world.

Several proposals have already come before the church. The Protocol is different than other proposals because it is a negotiated settlement agreed to by opposing sides of the debate on human sexuality. The mediation services of Mr. Kenneth Feinberg, a world-renowned attorney and mediator with no vested interest in the outcome of the agreement, proved invaluable in helping people of such diverse positions come to an agreement. The protocol has received cautious yet hopeful support from across the denomination, and it validates and expresses the reality and divergent directions that already exist in the denomination. Finally, the protocol offers a feasible plan of execution.



To be clear, the compromised settlement still needs to get past judicial procedures and attain General Conference approval. The constitutionality of the pending legislation supporting the negotiated settlement awaits a declaratory decision requested by the Council of Bishops from the Judicial Council prior to General Conference 2020 in May in Minneapolis.

The Protocol seeks to minimize litigious harm both before and after General Conference 2020. It aims to help sustain organizational vitality for the sake of our continued Methodist/Wesleyan witness in the world. It declares the intention of the diverse constituencies to unanimously support legislation for separation at General Conference 2020. And it signals to conferences, local congregations, clergy, and laity that they can start making decisions about the future now that a feasible framework with affiliative options, processes, financial agreements, and timelines has been provided.

The Protocol supports the empowerment of traditional congregations in the current United Methodist Church to create a new Wesleyan movement. The remaining, or post-separation



progressive United Methodist Church, would remove restrictive language against same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ persons. Central conferences, annual conferences, and local congregations can decide whether to stay with the post-separation United Methodist Church, join the new traditional expression of Wesleyan Methodism, or decide to become independent of either denomination.

Adopting the Protocol will give all Methodists the space and freedom to practice ministry in accordance with their understanding and interpretation of Scripture and theology. All sides will be free to offer a diverse world their Christian witness in ways that align with their understandings. There is strong hope that the Protocol can help unify opposing constituencies around the decision that it is best to separate from each other for now rather than continue to inflict harm on each other and the LGBTQ community. It could also help us expand the Christian witness to people not yet part of our church who match up with these affinities.

The Protocol entails several agreements and commitments. The first agreement calls for delegates at the 2020 General Conference to work together for its adoption and implementation. The Protocol offers an implementation process and a reasonable timeline for annual conferences and local congregations to decide which expression of the church they choose to affiliate with. The terms for the management and transfer of properties, assets, and liabilities are set forth.

The Protocol also contains key financial agreements. First, the new traditional Methodist denomination will be paid \$25 million over the next four years, with another \$2 million held in escrow for additional Methodist denominations that may form as a result of the Protocol. Additionally, \$39 million will be allocated to support communities historically marginalized by the sin of racism. The pension plans will remain in place for all clergy and lay employees affiliated with The United Methodist Church, regardless of which denomination under the Protocol they affiliate with. And lastly, churches that choose to move to another Methodist denomination other than the post-separation UMC will be allowed to keep their property and assets.

I am confident that the denominational, conference, and local church leaders will figure out how to adapt and restructure in the coming months and years to move forward in our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

But let us not ignore the reality that faithful people will be impacted in very personal ways should the Protocol be approved. Many in our congregations have experienced various types of painful separations in their lives and families. The separation of the denomination may surface past traumas and scarring. At deeper, more personal levels, this is what makes the separation of the Methodist Church at the denominational level so difficult.

Friends, now more than ever, we find ourselves in a most fragile season in the life of our church. The writer of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, writes that there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

We are in a season of dying and giving birth, uprooting and planting, harming and healing, tearing down and building up, laughing and weeping, embracing and refraining from embrace, giving up the search for a way forward together and searching for new ways forward. We are in a season for throwing away and keeping, tearing and mending, speaking and maintaining silence, hating and loving, warring and peace.

At this time, we are in a disorienting season where the church that shaped us and which we all value and love is coming to an end while something new is emerging. For now, we are all still part of the Great Plains Conference family. I call upon you to resist the temptation to arrive at quick answers and make hasty personal or group decisions because so much hangs in the balance, not only for our sakes but for the sake of the people in our mission field that need to know the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

As your bishop, I call upon the Great Plains clergy, laity, and congregations at this threshold moment for our denomination to draw from our ancient Christian tradition of group discernment as evidenced in Acts 15 where the Jerusalem Council met together to discern the will of God, debate, and consider the matter about what to do with the new Gentiles that were turning to God.

Susan Beaumont in chapter four of her new book, "How to Lead When You Do Not Know Where You are Going," offers an easy-to-follow, self-directed group discernment approach you can use in your church. The discernment approach uses the tools of consensus, prayer, silence, Scripture, listening circles, appreciative inquiry, storytelling, clearness committees, and seeks the consoling guidance of the Holy Spirit. A group discernment approach to seeking God's will is different than a decision-making approach. In group discernment, the participants adopt a stance of indifference to anything but the will of the divine as discovered by the group, setting aside matters of ego, politics, opinion, or personal interest. The goal of group discernment is to tap into the will and movement of the Holy Spirit. Pure discernment happens according to the leading of the Spirit and in the fullness of God's time, not accordance with our calendars and agendas.

I understand that a large part of the denomination is not yet ready to fully include LGBTQ persons in the whole life of the church. Though not a perfect plan, the Protocol may be what helps us move beyond "winner" and "loser" scenarios and stop the loop of crippling self-inflicted harm to the denominational body because of decades-long acrimony over matters of human sexuality. Perhaps if we decide to separate now over our differences, there will come a time in the future when what separates us today will be behind us tomorrow, and the Spirit will reunite us again into one people, with one Lord, one baptism, one faith, and one mission and ministry to the world.

As your bishop and a lifelong United Methodist, the reality and imminence of separation is painful because I believe that as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation we can, through the Spirit, offer a better witness to a broken, deeply divided, and polarized world. Nevertheless, I recognize that the disagreement within our denominational body is irreconcilable. Rest assured that I am resolved to do all in my capacity to nurture a supportive environment in which traditional,

centrist, and progressive congregations can remain vital, make healthy decisions for our futures, and move confidently forward to flourish in mission as disciples of Jesus Christ and bearers of Methodist/Wesleyan witness.

In closing, I again strongly encourage you to take the time as individuals and congregations to spiritually discern the will of God before deciding your next steps. Finally, I wish to thank all of our dedicated clergy, laity, and congregations that continue to fulfill our fourfold Wesleyan mission each and every day by helping people to love and stay in love with God, by offering the saving grace of Jesus Christ to those in our mission field, by serving others — especially the poor — and by seeking justice for the voiceless, the vulnerable, and the invisible.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ruben Saenz Jr.", with a stylized, cursive script.

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.