

Dear Friends and Members of Fairhope UMC,

As acknowledged in our worship services yesterday, many of you have seen reports about potential changes within the current configuration of the United Methodist Church at large. As is the case with all news stories, some sources are more accurate than others, so I wanted to share with you a personal word of encouragement and information. I also write this correspondence as a call to prayer and consideration for the months ahead.

This coming May 5-15, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church will be in session in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It will be comprised of approximately 850 delegates from around the world, and they are the only body that sets policy for the UMC. The General Conference will be engaging a mass of petitions related to various areas of the denomination, including an array of proposals for the redesign, restructure, or division of the denomination (in addition to this proposal unveiled last week). Many of these proposals are related to the ongoing struggle in the UMC concerning LGBTQIA issues including, but not limited to, same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQIA people as clergy.

For a list of prominent examples, see the following comparison chart:

<https://cdnsc.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2019/12/13/17/36/General-Conference-UMC-Plans-Chart-V5>

Even at first glance, one can see the diversity and challenge of navigating the many variables from each plan. I dare say that none of these proposals are perfect in nature. I am also convinced that each plan represents the painstaking work of various groups of United Methodists who read their Bibles, seek to love God and neighbor, and are committed to the future witness of the United Methodist Church. When it comes to this particular set of issues, however, there are clearly competing visions as to what the Lord would require of us in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Thus, we have what many leaders in the denomination refer to as “the current impasse.” Dr. Ed Glaize and I were traveling companions together to St. Louis last year at the special session of General Conference in 2019. The purpose of that special session was centered around the aspiration that the UMC could come to some terms of agreement on this issue. Guided by the work of the Commission on The Way Forward, the stated desire was that this historically divisive discussion (which has been ongoing at every General Conference since 1972) might no longer be able to distract or derail the church from its fundamental mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

That was the hope. So Ed and I went to see it for ourselves. Your present Board of Stewards Chair, Dr. Gene Lammers, was also in attendance. The Conference gathered from all over the world and prayed for days that the will of God would be revealed in our midst. Then the voting began and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The lack of reconciliation was evident and painful. We all agreed it was awful. Knowing that such a system is inherently designed to create winners and losers, we left with the understanding that a purely legislative solution to this dilemma will never be fully satisfactory to all involved.

As seen in the exchanges from the General Conference floor, the caustic, “either/or” approach did not bode well for a gathering of Wesleyan Christians who have been theologically marinated in the language of grace. Suffice to say it was not an uplifting experience, and yet, we all knew that another General Conference was on the horizon for 2020. Surely, more strategy was yet to come.

And so it has...

On Friday, January 3, a “Proposal of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation” was released by a 16-member group of United Methodist bishops and representatives from progressive, centrist, and traditionalist caucuses.

A copy of the proposal is available in the church office or you can go to the following website:

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/diverse-leaders-group-offers-separation-plan>

As I understand it (following consultation with fellow clergy colleagues), this group is proposing a process that would allow central conferences (conferences outside the United States), annual conferences (conferences in the United States) and local churches to join a new “traditionalist” Methodist denomination while maintaining all of their property, assets, and liabilities. Hypothetically, once the new Methodist denomination is organized, the remaining UMC may reorganize to consider repealing any church law related to LGBTQIA persons including, but not limited to, same-sex marriage and clergy.

What this proposal would mean for the United Methodist Church in Alabama-West Florida is that the annual conference could have the opportunity to vote to join a new “traditionalist” Methodist denomination. If the conference doesn’t vote at all or less than 57% vote to join the new form of the denomination, then it remains in the existing UMC. In either case, a local church could decide to move to either the newly formed Methodist denomination or remain in the existing UMC.

If this plan is approved by the General Conference this coming May, there are some key dates of which to be aware. This plan says that the new Methodist denomination must be formed by May 15, 2021. If an Annual Conference is going to vote to move to the new Methodist denomination, they must vote by July 1, 2021. However, local churches have until December 31, 2024 to decide their denominational affiliation. So, there is no immediate “deadline” that Fairhope UMC has to meet, nor is there any immediate decision that our lay leaders or clergy will need to make. We will have plenty of time to make wise and purposeful decisions, without radically altering our historic beliefs about how we relate to persons in our community, and without endangering the current use and stewardship of our existing property.

To echo my friend, Dr. Bill Brunson of Vestavia Hills UMC in north Alabama, *“I hope that you have noticed that I have used the words ‘proposal’ and ‘if.’ Contrary to how it has been shared through some media sources, this is still a proposal with many hurdles ahead of it.”*

Before this proposal can be voted on by the General Conference, it has to be developed into actual petitions and then submitted to the Commission on General Conference. In order to make that happen, some annual conferences will have to hold special sessions to submit this plan in petition form in order to meet the final 45-day cut off for petitions.

The plan and its individual petitions will have to be assessed by the Judicial Council (the legal review body of the church) to be sure that there are no violations of church law. The costs related to the plan will have to be evaluated by the General Council on Finance and Administration. The Commission on General Conference will have to find space on the General Conference Agenda. If this new proposal clears each of these groups, it would then have to be discussed, debated, and voted on by the 850 delegates in May.

So, while this proposed plan has the potential to be approved by the General Conference, it has a long way to go and is not a guarantee. What I am certain of is that the lay and clergy leadership of Fairhope UMC will continue to watch this situation and constantly evaluate the plans and proposals that may affect the denomination, as we have been doing for several years.

(If you are still reading this, please reward yourself with a deep breath at this time. As Rev. Antonio would say...breathe in God's mercy!)

On this day of Epiphany, I am grateful for the image of the traveling Magi in the gospel of Matthew. These were wise persons that did not settle for mere hearsay, but who made the effort to seek the light of Christ for themselves and for the sake of their respective communities. Matthew says that they followed a star as a means of direction, and that at some point in the journey *“the star stopped over the place where the child was.”* And once it did, they were *“overwhelmed with joy”* (Mt. 2:9). I can believe it!

Friends, when it comes to matters of the 2020 General Conference, I confess to you that the United Methodist Church as a whole is not there yet. This global church is still on the road. Nonetheless, my focus is on the question of the call of God for the saints here at Fairhope UMC. *What is our home, where is our joy, and how can we best get there together?*

With only 6+ months as your Senior Pastor, I do not pretend to know your heart and mind on this matter, no more than you presume to know mine. But for many, I suspect that guiding star is still on the move, which can be tiresome or even frustrating. Then again, it may also be God's doing. God's people have been known to wander now and again, and may even be prone to grumble along the way. I accept this truth, just as I do not imagine that those wise men marched consistently in tight formation and in a straight line with no second-guessing of themselves or one another. Such is the walk of faith. So yes, our joy in this matter may be pending, but still, this does not prohibit us from the search.

Like always, we have options before us. Another is to simply *be still and know that I am God* (Ps. 46).

For now and in the future, I am confident that Fairhope UMC intends to be more of what it has been in the past. At our best, we are a prayerful and hopeful refuge. We have declared ourselves to be a scripturally relevant, United Methodist Church. Our pursuit is to be a loving, invitational community. In doing so, we have also committed ourselves as courageous, visible agents of change. Our vision is well stated—*We exist to love boldly, casting the light of Jesus Christ into the world.* This is the vision which I was honored to inherit when my family and I arrived here in July 2019. These are the grace-filled values which I am dedicated to uphold here and now.

As I said from the pulpit on Sunday, *we wish to have, not a little candlelight with a Christmas-tree fragrance, but a storm lantern that does not blow out even when it is blown upon from all sides.*

This is my hope for Fairhope UMC, for the churches and leaders of the Alabama-West Florida Conference, and for the General Conference at large. I invite you to join me in prayer for all of these delegates, and for the future discernment of our beloved denomination. As we continue our journey as a congregation, I look forward to meeting with many of you at our upcoming listening sessions that will continue to be scheduled throughout the beginning of this year. By all means, let's get together!

For a list of current dates and registration, please go to www.fairhopeumc.org

Know that it is my privilege to share the work of ministry with each of you.

Grace to You,

Darren