

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GLOBAL METHODIST CHURCH

On February 26, 2019, presiding Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey gaveled to a close The United Methodist Church's contentious 2019 special General Conference held in St. Louis, Missouri. While the delegates voted to reaffirm the denomination's teachings on marriage, its sexual ethics, and its ordination standards, many UM Church members were certain the bitter conflict that had roiled the denomination for nearly its entire history would continue.

And so it came as a surprise to people all across the denomination when, just over ten months later, Bishop Harvey and seven of her episcopal colleagues were joined by eight leaders representing major advocacy groups representing centrists, progressives, and traditionalists, to announce a plan calling for the amicable and orderly separation of the UM Church. The plan (named the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation) explicitly called for the creation of a new traditionalist Methodist denomination, that would in time come to be called the Global Methodist Church.

Once United Methodists absorbed the shock of the proposal, it gained wide acceptance as bishops and other leaders promoted its passage at the impending 2020 General Conference. Indeed, given that key members of the Council of Bishops, a diverse collection of advocacy groups, and several annual conferences supported it, many believed the Protocol was headed for an affirmative vote.

That being the case, a group of leaders representing traditionalists across the denomination, met in Atlanta, Georgia, in late March of 2020. The purpose of the meeting was to begin planning for the creation of a new Methodist Church that local churches would – according to the terms of the Protocol – be free to join with all their properties and assets, shortly after the May 2020 General Conference. The Atlanta group called for the formation of a transitional body that would meet for perhaps three to seven months to lay the groundwork for a new traditionalist Church.

In less than a month, the United States and much of the world came to a standstill with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The UM Church was forced to postpone the May 2020 General Conference, and so the vote on the Protocol was put on hold. However, the leaders tapped to prepare the groundwork for the new traditionalist Church convened for their first meeting on March 30, 2020, under the name the Transitional Leadership Council. The members had accepted the invitation to serve on the council in early March, prior to the onset of the pandemic. They believed they were signing on to serve for no more than several months, but events no one could foresee would prove them very wrong.

At the time, United Methodists believed the postponed General Conference would meet in 2021, and the Protocol would pass. Consequently, the Transitional Leadership Council put the intervening time to good use by setting to work on preparing a Transitional Book of Doctrines of Discipline. Initially, the document was created to help expedite the work of the delegates to be elected to the new denomination's convening General Conference, which many people believed would take place in either late 2021 or early 2022, after the rescheduled UM Church General Conference met in late-August to early-September 2021. However, the UM Church postponed the gathering again, citing travel restrictions related to access to Covid vaccines and an inability to leverage technology for an online or hybrid gathering.

As people around the world were gaining access to vaccines, and organizations of all kinds were holding large gatherings, traditionalist United Methodists expected the UM Church would find a way for the General Conference delegates to meet in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in late summer 2022. And once again they looked forward to a vote approving the Protocol, thereby freeing their local churches to join the newly forming traditionalist Methodist Church.

However, by late 2021 and early 2022, traditionalist leaders across the UM Church were beginning to wonder if the UM Church was truly committed to holding a General Conference in 2022 (the suspicion turned out to be prescient). After multiple conversations with traditionalist clergy, laity, and advocacy groups across the denomination, the Transitional Leadership Council determined it would have to at least be prepared to call for the launch of a new Methodist Church should the UM Church postpone its 2020 General Conference, yet again.

On March 3, 2022, the UM Church's Commission on the General Conference did just that, announcing the third postponement of the denomination's General Conference. And instead of a one-year delay to 2023, it said the Conference would not meet until 2024. The Transitional Leadership Council immediately announced it would launch the Global Methodist Church on May 1, 2022.

When the GM Church launched on that date, it was composed of approximately two dozen local churches in the Bulgaria Provisional Annual Conference, and a newly forming church plant in the Philippines. However, the TLC knew other local churches around the world would want to join as they had the opportunity. Consequently, it started using the Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline as a guide for leading a denomination that would need more time to coalesce given the state of the UM Church.

Local churches interested in exiting the UM Church so they could join the GM Church, were forced to navigate a variety of pathways out of their UM Church annual conferences. They had to contend with vastly different timetables, terms, and financial requirements. Some were allowed to leave under amicable terms, others faced onerous conditions (e.g., paying exorbitant exit fees much higher than in other annual conferences or abandoning property assets), and still others did not receive clear exit terms until very late in the process for disaffiliating from the UM Church (i.e., December 31, 2023).

Still, within several months, over 1,000 small, medium, and large local churches in the United States joined the GM Church. Those who arrived early came from UM annual conferences where disaffiliation terms were amicable and orderly. These conferences tended to be located in the southeast and south-central part of country, though there were notable exceptions (e.g., the North Georgia and Florida Annual Conferences). Many local churches in the northeast, midwest, and the west were confronted with significant obstacles, although some conferences in these regions were willing to offer fair terms (e.g., the Indiana and Western Pennsylvania Annual Conferences).

Whatever the circumstances, the local churches that disaffiliated to join the GM Church had to demonstrate tremendous fortitude throughout the process. Typically, an exit required multiple congregational meetings to consider the options, a church conference where two-thirds of the church's members had to vote for disaffiliating, and in many cases, the payment of tens of thousands of dollars in exit fees. And where congregational votes fell just short of the two-thirds threshold for exiting, often those in the majority determined to plant new churches and join the GM Church anyway.

Since the disaffiliation terms offered to many in the U.S. were not extended to local churches outside the U.S., the process for exiting one denomination and joining the other has often proven to be a trial. Many UM local churches and entire annual conferences are just now in the process of forging pathways out of the UM Church so they can join the GM Church.

In the long run, what initially looked like it would be a rare, orderly and amicable separation of a major Protestant denomination, ended up taking more time than the authors and many supporters of the Protocol intended. Still, thousands of people persevered amidst the challenges of the Covid pandemic, the serial postponements of the UM Church's General Conference, and the vagaries of their annual conferences' conditions for exiting the UM Church. Pastors and rank-and-file members in thousands of local churches

organized, informed themselves, voted, and sacrificially gave of their time, talent, and resources to build the Global Methodist Church.

The new denomination is now composed of 4,615 local churches that are organized into 31 provisional annual conferences around the world. It will hold its convening General Conference in San Jose, Costa Rica, September 20 – 26, 2024. And the Transitional Leadership Council that thought it would only have to meet for several months will finally be able to pass the torch of leadership to others as the GM Church adopts a more fully developed leadership structure.

Readers can learn more about the Global Methodist Church by exploring its general website, and now they can follow all the details about the convening General Conference by visiting [So the World Will Know](#).

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