

Reasons to Stay UMC or join the GMC

The following are two blog posts written about a month apart and circulated together through churches during Annual Conference. Each presents its own set of arguments about the value of staying...or going...

As you read these posts, know that each is written from the differing ideological views of each author. Both deeply love the church and are deeply committed to serving in the name of Jesus. But each has profound differences in how they see that lived out in the life of the church.

By opening our eyes, minds and hearts to people of faith...even when they disagree with one another...we see how God can use all people to bring about mission and ministry in the world around us.

5 Reasons to Stay in The United Methodist Church

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My roots are deep in The United Methodist Church. Like most “preachers’ kids,” I went through a period in which I questioned my inherited faith tradition, but I came through that process with a deeper appreciation and love for the UMC and all it represents. “Ten Reasons Why I’ll Join the Global Methodist Church,” by Jay Therrell, President of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, Florida Chapter, has recently made a new appearance on Facebook. If you read through that document closely, the portrait of the GMC he paints is congregational in polity (not connectional), creedal in orientation (not oriented around “faith working by love”), and essentially exclusive (not inclusive in vision, despite its “global” title).

I co-chaired the World Methodist Council/Baptist World Alliance Dialogue, and the ten reasons document “feels” like something my Baptist colleagues may have drafted. I do not mean that pejoratively in any way. I love my Baptist brothers and sisters, but the UMC offers a different vision of Christian faith and practice. What concerns me most about this blog is the way in which it diverges sharply, in my humble opinion, from a genuinely Wesleyan vision. As May 1 looms large for many of us who are United Methodists, here are my five reasons to stay in the UMC.

1. The UMC has a wide, gracious, and loving embrace. The church I think most people yearn for is a community of faith that puts love at the very center of its life and vision. This openness to all people as unique brothers and sisters deeply

loved by God characterizes the UMC I know. All God's children are invited to put their gifts to use in the service of God's reign of reconciliation.

2. The UMC aspires to be Christ-like in practice. Countless surveys over the past decades demonstrate that the majority of people in the United States view the church as judgmental. Jesus gives us a different model of relating to the world and others. The UMC seeks to cultivate disciples of Jesus who are like him – merciful, compassionate, forgiving.

3. The UMC is shaped by a dynamic view of scripture. The UMC is strongly biblical in its orientation. The Bible is the bedrock upon which the faith of United Methodists is built. But its view of the Bible is not simplistic; rather, like Wesley, it embraces a dynamic conception of scripture as the “living Word.” Antithetical to literalistic views of scripture, the United Methodist view offers a rich, robust, but yes scriptural foundation for life in the triune God.

4. The UMC is deeply concerned about growth in grace. Not so much invested in believing the right things, its primary passion is translating God's love into action in life. It elevates the importance of practices of piety, like prayer, but also advocates acts of mercy – compassion and justice for all. The UMC offers a holistic spirituality that refuses to separate the spiritual from the concrete realities of life.

5. The UMC is missional in character. The UMC does not live for itself, but for others. It is missional in its design to partner with God in God's great work of love in the world. Its fundamental orientation is outward, spun out in the life of the world to wage peace, work for justice, and to emulate the “beloved community” God desires for all.

Ten Reasons Why I'll Join the Global Methodist Church

Jay Therrell – (President of the Wesleyan Covenant Associate, Ordained Elder in the Global Methodist Church and former Elder in the United Methodist Church)

This recent season in the life of The United Methodist Church has been challenging. It feels like we're stuck in limbo as we wait another 15 months for General Conference and watch senior UMC leaders make decisions that violate our covenant. Local churches – especially ones that lean traditionalist – experience long-time members leaving because they can no longer stomach the drama. So, what can we do?

In times like this, I try to focus on the positive and what God is doing. I was humbled to be one of the drafters of the Global Methodist Church's (in formation) *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline*. I invite you to take a

break from the drama and focus on the future as I share ten reasons why I'll join the Global Methodist Church ("GMC") when it is launched. (All paragraph references are to the *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline*.)

1. Orthodox Theology That Stands on Scriptural Authority

The Global Methodist Church will have a strong, orthodox doctrine squarely in the center of the 2,000- year tradition of the greater church – Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. We will become a creedal church that proudly stands on the rich tradition and history of our church fathers and mothers. Intentionally, we added as official doctrine of the GMC, the Nicene Creed (§105.2), the Apostles' Creed (§105.1), and the Definition of Chalcedon (§105.3). It may surprise you to know that the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds are not official doctrine of The United Methodist Church. They're in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, but not the *Book of Discipline*. As a retired bishop recently shared with me, "The Nicene Creed is the universal creed of the Christian church." For whatever reason, John Wesley neglected to include it in his *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*. No longer will that be the case.

Moreover, we have added the Definition of Chalcedon adopted by the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. The Chalcedonian Definition cements our understanding of who Jesus is. It ensures that the GMC's Christology will be orthodox and clear. To me these items are foundational. They signal that the GMC is deliberately aligning itself with the wider, ecumenical, historical authority of the greater church. I give thanks for this.

2. A Leaner and Simpler Church with Less Top-Down Decisions

The Global Methodist Church will be a church that is dramatically streamlined. We have done our best to create a flatter, simpler, more decentralized church where the local church will be empowered to make decisions that best enable it to carry out its mission. As a result, local churches will have greater control and keep more money in their church treasuries. Less bureaucracy and institution mean less apportionments. We trust that your local church will spend its money better than a denomination. The general level of the church will be significantly smaller. We will have no more general agencies with their large budgets and many employees. Instead, we will have five connectional commissions primarily led by laity and clergy volunteers. The GMC will be a denomination with a smaller footprint but a greater impact for God's kingdom.

3. An Emphasis on the Local Church as the Front Line of Ministry

I've been a delegate to General and Jurisdictional Conferences. I've been to more annual conferences than I can remember. I've been a district superintendent. I've never seen a new disciple made at those levels of the church. The Holy Spirit makes new disciples through the local church. The GMC

views the local church as the front line of ministry and has done its best to orient the entire denomination around it. Presently, it can seem like one of the main reasons local churches exist is to pay apportionments and complete forms to supply the upper levels of church bureaucracy. In the GMC, the districts, annual conferences, and General Conference will do their best to ensure local churches are equipped to lead people to Jesus. This shift is important because it means that extra agencies, commissions, and institutions are no longer needed. Moreover, the funding for those entities will stay at the local church to be used to further its mission.

4. A Simpler, Fairer Ordination System

Local churches will become the entity that certifies candidates in the new Global Methodist Church (§406.1). This fits with the idea of making the local church the front line of ministry. It also negates the need for a district committee on ordained ministry – eliminating an entire level in the ordination process. Certified candidates will also have a six-month internship/employment in a local church to aid in their discernment that God has indeed called them to set-apart ministry (§406.2).

The master of divinity will no longer be the sole path to ordination as an elder. In the GMC, there will be multiple educational routes including completion of the Course of Study, a bachelor's degree in the practice of ministry, a master of arts degree in the practice of ministry, or a master of divinity degree (§407.1). Multiple routes mean greater flexibility that can better accommodate the varied family and employment situations of candidates.

For decades, licensed local pastor have been treated institutionally as second-class clergy. They aren't given the same pay, voting rights, or benefits. The GMC will not have any second-class clergy. Depending on their level of completion of the UMC Course of Study and/or Advanced Course of Study, current local pastors will transfer into the GMC as either deacons or elders with full ordination (§417.3).

5. Greater Accountability for Bishops, Clergy, and Churches

One of the mainstays of our current denominational drama is the extreme lack of accountability for bishops, clergy, and churches. Christians are called to live in accountable communities – accountable to God and to one another. The GMC will ensure that accountable community is strong.

Bishops will be term-limited to ensure that once a person is elected bishop, they no longer have a lifetime warranty on the office (§501). Additionally, bishops will no longer be accountable only to one another. During the transitional period of the GMC, bishops will be held accountable by the Transitional Leadership

Council (§§807, 809). The first General Conference will determine an ongoing method for accountability, but it is presumed that a similar arrangement will be made with some sort of commission related to episcopal accountability.

Clergy and churches will also be under greater accountability. Incoming clergy from The UMC will have to pledge that they agree with and will uphold the *Doctrines and Discipline* (§417.1-2). We included a new administrative complaint process for bishops and pastors so presiding elders and bishops could address issues of ineffectiveness (§§806-7). Lastly, a new provision ensures that local churches will adhere to church doctrine. After being warned for not preaching and teaching orthodox doctrine, local congregations can be disaffiliated by an annual conference (§354).

6. A Less Expensive Church = More Money for Local Ministry

The four-year budget for the general level of The UMC from 2016-2020 was approximately \$604 million. That figure is staggering to me. I don't deny that there is some ministry and kingdom-good that is done through that money, but the sheer fact that we've created a general bureaucracy that requires those kinds of resources to sustain it boggles my mind. We have intentionally created a general level of the GMC that will take a small fraction of that money (§§704-5). Additionally, annual conferences will be encouraged to downsize and re-orient around empowering the local churches (§§610-13). With a flatter and simpler annual conference structure, those budgets will decrease as well.

The bottom line: significantly more money will remain in local church treasuries. **Many have estimated that most local churches will see a reduction in apportionments of at least half.** Local churches will soon be better resourced to carry out their mission.

7. No Trust Clause

Almost three hundred years ago, John Wesley wrote the first trust clause to protect Methodist meeting houses and buildings. Wesley's intent was to ensure that those buildings – key resources in the Methodist mission of making disciples – would be used for orthodox purposes. Today, I would argue that we use the trust clause as an institutional method of survival. It has almost nothing to do with ensuring orthodoxy and instead has been the primary instrument used to keep traditionalist churches in a denomination that, in many places, is no longer following church law. The Global Methodist Church wants to be a cadre of the called, not a company of the constrained. There is no trust clause in the GMC (§1902). Local churches will own their assets for the glory and service of God to do with as they discern.

8. Greater Autonomy for Local Churches

Making disciples in Jacksonville, Florida looks quite different than making disciples in Miami, Florida. It looks still different than making them in Chicago. It looks WAY different than making new followers of Jesus in Liberia, Russia, and the Philippines. If the denomination is truly to be oriented around the local church as the front line of ministry, then it makes sense that we must empower local churches more. That's exactly what we did when we drafted the *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline*. Local churches will be able to structure themselves in a way that best enhances their mission (§1337). Each congregation will be free to pursue its own property and casualty insurance through affinity programs established at large, national church insurance companies. Moreover, when it comes to the appointing of clergy, local churches will have greater say in who their pastor will be (§1510). The bishop will still have the final say on appointing clergy guaranteeing that female clergy and clergy of color will not be discriminated against. That said, churches will now have true consultation instead of simply being notified of who their new pastor is – as has happened recently in some places.

9. More Freedom and Less Duplication

I was once told by a friend who is a leader in another non-Methodist denomination that Methodists don't play well with others. I asked him what he meant by that, and he said, "You all don't use the same ministries that most other churches do. You always have to create your own." That statement has stayed with me over the years. Instead of partnering with other local, national, and international ministries that already have wide distribution and scale, we often try to reinvent the wheel. The results are more and more institutions that require funding from local churches. Those same local churches have little to no input into the direction or mission of the institutions they're required to support.

In the GMC, we won't do that. Instead of creating a large mission sending agency, we'll encourage local churches to partner with one that already exists and that they choose. Another example might be that provisional annual conferences may not choose to build and maintain expensive camps and retreat centers. Instead, local churches would be free to partner with existing ones that fit with their mission and strategy. The result will be less duplication of kingdom efforts and greater ability for local churches to align with organizations that represent who they feel God is leading them to be.

10. The New Church will be Global in Nature

The Global Methodist Church will launch simultaneously on four different continents: North America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Recently, there have been greater talks and efforts that lead me to be hopeful that eventually the GMC will be present on five continents – adding South and Central America. Already the

Transitional Leadership Council is a diverse group of global traditionalists including Americans, Russians, Africans, Filipinos, and Koreans. While it's impossible to know what the eventual makeup of the GMC will be, I will not be surprised if Anglos are in the minority. Some of the most effective and orthodox leaders I know come from Africa, Korea, Russia, and the Philippines. I look forward to their greater influence, leadership, and teaching.

Our future is bright! **I know that I know that I know that our best days are ahead.** The bottom line for me is that moving to the GMC will enable traditionalists to better share the saving Good News of Jesus Christ and make the realities of heaven the realities of earth. This is a future worth working towards and waiting for.