**How the Protocol might impact theological education?**

Reflection by Philip Wingeier-Rayo

I would like to begin this reflection with a clarification that the “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) is just a proposal that will need to be approved by the General Conference delegates in May, and thus, these ruminations are merely hypothetical. However, it comes with a great deal of weight given the broad representation and constituencies of the 16-member team. So as the 2020 delegates to General Conference discern how they will vote on the proposed Protocol, as well as the other plans, I believe that it is fair to consider what the implications of the plan for the various branches and ministries of the church—including Higher Education.

As one who has taught in higher education and theological education for over 20 years—both inside the United States and abroad—and currently serves as dean for one of the 13 United Methodist seminaries, I am very concerned about the pending division in the UMC, and in particular how a separation might impact theological education and the development of future leaders. I believe that leadership development is the lifeblood of any organization—especially the church. If you need evidence for the importance of good leadership, just look at the transition that occurs every July 1st in any UM church during appointment season. Upon the arrival of a vibrant and visionary pastor attendance and vitality increases and you observe the opposite trend when that same pastor is moved. If we are unable to recruit, train and equip a steady stream of young clergy, then the church is in big trouble whether it divides or remains together as a big tent.

Young people are faced with the enormous cost of studying an advanced degree and are wondering what the payoff will be. When I taught undergraduate at Pfeiffer University in North Carolina and recruited prospective students at career fairs and open houses, the parents (who ultimately pay) want to know what is the future for my son or daughter in this field? The federal government has put a lot of emphasis into the STEM fields, and since elementary school our children have been told multiple times that the future is in technology, computers and artificial intelligence. So the parents and prospective student alike will ask: What is the cost-benefit of this career path?

Once a student finishes undergraduate they most likely already have taken out loans before even considering a graduate degree. According to a 2019 Christian Century article the average MDiv graduate in 2018 carried $54,600 in student load debt.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given the average UM pastor earns $44,396, it would take a long-time to pay-off that debt. The decline of the UMC has also seen a decline in the Theological Education Fund that has provided scholarships and subsidized seminary education. The ordination process in the UMC is also very rigorous, making a guaranteed appointment much less certain for a seminarian entering candidacy. These economic realities do not make ordained elder a popular career path for anyone.

Now infuse the uncertain future for the UMC and the controversies surrounding the ordination of LGBTQ persons and same-sex marriage, and we are really shooting ourselves in the foot. I know personally of a promising cis-gendered 2018 graduate of our seminary that immediately following the special session of the 2019 General Conference wrote his conference’s Board of Ordained Ministries and discontinued his candidacy. The exclusive language in the Traditional Plan did not personally impact him, but he discontinued the candidacy process out of solidarity with those who were excluded. We also had several seminary applicants call and withdraw their application for admission last spring following the special session. In spite of our president’s stand against the Traditional Plan, these young people did not want to study at a seminary that was affiliated with a denomination that had a discriminatory stance on homosexuality.

Not surprisingly, the UMC is experiencing a sharp decline in the number of young clergy (defined as 35 and younger). According to a report by the Lewis Center for Church leadership the figure has dropped from 2385 in 1990 to 785 in 2018[[3]](#footnote-3). This is a decline in real numbers and also a drop in the percentage of young clergy of all UM ordained elders from 11 to just 8 percent. This does not bode well for denomination that will need good leadership to move through the proposed separation and messy aftermath. Young clergy are also our best bet to invite and evangelize their peers—who comprise most of the “nones” and “dones.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Yet young people are underrepresented both as clergy and in our governing process. Young people under the age of 35 comprised only 7% of delegates. Yet they made their collective voice heard by delivering a statement that was read on the floor of the special session that stated: “Over and over, bishops and delegates have told us from the floor here, they don’t want us to leave, but with all due respect, you are not fighting to keep us here.”[[5]](#footnote-5) None of the 16-member negotiating team were young, nor did anyone claim to represent young adults. So how will the Protocol impact the recruitment and retention of young people?

Fortunately, we have a God who continues to call people young and old to the ministry. In spite of all the trends, our fall 2019 incoming class hard an increase in first-year 20 something students. Students at various stages of life feel God’s call to serve and want a quality theological education to prepare them for ministry. One of the most rewarding part of teaching in seminary is listening to students share their call stories. In spite of the dire situation of the UMC, God moves in spite of our weakness and calls people to lead us into the future.

**What would the impact of the Protocol be on theological education?**

First of all, I would like to share that while the separation plan may bring an end to decades of division within the UMC, I lament much of what would be lost if the Protocol is approved. In more than 20 years of teaching I have discussed human sexuality with students in and outside the classroom and I believe that it is beneficial to our students to have various opinions, theological beliefs, and worldviews represented in the classroom. It is important for students to exposed to people who are different from themselves as part of the formative process because it prepares them for the diversity that they will find in their parishes and ministry settings. If students are only exposed to doctrines and beliefs with which they agree, then it creates an echo chamber and they will be ill-prepared for the diversity of beliefs out there.

For example, I have taught classes where we have discussed human sexuality and had traditionalists debate in a loving way with persons who identify as LGBTQ and their allies. Many students who are undecided or haven’t been exposed to these ideas greatly benefit from a spirited debate exploring different theological perspectives. We produce more informed and better prepared candidates for ministry when we have thoroughly discussed human sexuality and can put a human face on the issues. At our seminary we have international students from the Central Conferences with a more traditionalist view of marriage staying in residence halls, eating in the refectory, sitting in class, and singing in choir together with persons who identify as LGBTQ. I have taught classes where students debate biblical interpretation and theology together during a 3-hour class session, yet continue to love, respect and go on to be life-long friends. It can be a powerful experience for a traditionalist who has never met someone who identifies as LGBTQ to sit in class together, worship together in chapel, and graduate together—even if neither one changes their theological stance on the issue. The same is true for someone who identifies as LGBTQ to meet and study together with someone from the Central Conferences with a traditionalist view of marriage. There is no substitute for vehemently disagreeing with someone who you ultimately love and respect as a person.

I have also found that students who disagree on human sexuality may actually agree on other doctrinal or theological issues, such as the doctrine of creation, Christology, and the mission of the church, among other beliefs. Some people who identify as LGBTQ actually come from traditional churches in the Bible Belt and the deep faith instilled in them during childhood has been a source of strength in the midst of rejections from the church and family. If the Protocol were to be approved by General Conference in May, I hope that the different branches of Methodism can still provide theological education opportunities that allow our future leaders to study together.

Moreover, behind one’s beliefs on human sexuality there are underlying theological differences. Often one’s belief on marriage is related to theological method—for example the question of authority. How does one come to a theological stance on marriage and covenantal relationships? What is one’s position on biblical authority? How does the Wesleyan Quadrilateral inform one’s beliefs on marriage, the family and other social issues? If the Protocol were to pass, are there ways that theological students can be exposed to those who have a different theology? If students are not exposed to those who believe differently in the classroom, how will they be prepared to the theological diversity in their parish and ministry settings?

While it is difficult to generalize and one should not stereotype, there also may be other underlying socio-economic differences between those persons who decide to remain in the UMC vs. those who spin off as traditionalists. Generally speaking, I believe it is safe to say that the traditionalists are predominantly more rural and the progressives more urban. The traditionalists reside more in the South and the Midwest, while the progressives live more on the coasts and major urban centers. The traditionalists and progressives may also represent different liturgical and worship styles that represent the diversity of our Wesleyan tradition. It is important for seminarians to be exposed to different worship styles in preparation for ministry. Some of the larger megachurches may leave the UMC, while the smaller congregations stay. The traditionalists tend to be more White, while US-based persons of color will most likely remain with the UMC. It remains to be seen what the Central Conferences will do, but I pray that the 13 UM seminaries can continue to be blessed with international students that enrich us with the gifts and realities of the global church. If the Protocol were to pass, would students self-select into seminaries of like-minded persons with regard to class, region, worship preference, church-size and even race? Would their denominations pre-determine which seminaries qualify as adequate ministerial training? I believe that it would be tragic if the seminary classroom would lose its diversity (in all its manifestations) that would rob students of the opportunity to be exposed to those who believe differently and come from different backgrounds.

On the positive side, if the Protocol were to be passed, then many persons who identify as LGBTQ and their allies, who are currently in a holding pattern, may move forward toward their call to ministry. Removing the restrictive language in the UM Book of Discipline would make it clear that persons who identify as LGBTQ can pursue ordination without their sexual identify being a factor in their preparedness for ordained ministry. Allies of the LGBTQ community would have a clear conscious of serving in a denomination that does not discriminate based on sexual identity. It would also allow those potential students who hold traditionalist view toward marriage to not feel that they will be asked to do something against their conscious--whether it be perform a same-sex marriage or be within a denomination that allows it.

In conclusion, it would be my hope that as delegates discern how to vote on the Protocol, and if it passes, that we keep diversity within our seminaries. Some seminaries may attempt to line themselves up with a particular camp, or position themselves to benefit from a split, however I would hope that any spin-off denominations will still recognize and send their students to any of the United Methodist seminaries so that the future leaders in the Wesleyan tradition can continue to build relationships, study, learn and grow together. We are all on a journey. Seminary students may have an idea of where they want to go, but God—through the Holy Spirit—is guiding all of us. Some students begin seminary believing one way and conclude in a very different place. Isolating our future seminary students could have the effect of cutting off the work of the Holy Spirit. As seminarians graduate, they will serve in churches and communities where they will need to work with those whom believe differently from themselves. This is a life skill that must be practiced, and seminary is the ideal learning community. As Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6 “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

1. Click here to read the Protocol: <https://cdnsc.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2020/01/03/15/48/Protocol-of-Reconciliation-and-Grace-through-Separation> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/what-pastors-get-paid-and-when-it-s-not-enough> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/clergy-age-trends-give-cause-for-concern/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/young-adults-around-the-world-are-less-religious-by-several-measures/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.umglobal.org/2019/05/philip-wingeier-rayo-united-methodist.html?m=1&fbclid=IwAR3E8wY9_6MzHo-EtulhWJipgZoa6XGkC5BOQeTmmQoogSPsGXcSgrnT_rI> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)