

Quote Me on This | May 3, 2021 | by Chris Ritter

This is a sample of the posts that arrive weekly to the inboxes of members of Team Caffeine, subscribers to PeopleNeedJesus.net.

Team Caffeine,

Happy Monday. As always, thanks for being part of this community of church leaders seeking to faithfully navigate the seismic changes happening in Methodism. A special welcome is extended to the newest members of TC.

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Reflections from the WCA Global Gathering

I was eager to travel to Montgomery for the Fifth Global Gathering of the Wesleyan Covenant Association. Like the rest of the world, the folks comprising WCA have not been able to physically gather together for some months. So much has happened since the originally scheduled date of November 2020. But, in a larger sense, there was *never* supposed to be a fifth gathering. We left the 2019 Global Gathering in Tulsa hoping it would be the last and that we would next convene under the rubrics of a new denomination. Life is funny that way.

An in-person meeting provides opportunity to stand in the hallways and share moods. There are conversations over breakfast and dinners out with friends. Today I would like to share what I picked up from three days of meetings as a Global Council, Legislative Assembly, and Global Gathering of WCA (April 29-May 1, 2021).

1) The Global Methodist Movement is Growing

For all the denominational foam and lather, a traditional understanding of the Christian faith comprises the majority of United Methodism. As more people understand what is happening in the denomination, interest grows in the Global Methodist Church. The new, extended timeline has provided opportunity for information to reach UM laity otherwise shielded from it by their pastors. But the delay has also advanced a sense of restlessness from those who want immediate action.

Many churches that can get out now are seeking to do so. This includes the largest UM congregations in Indiana, Illinois, and Georgia. Anecdotally, it appears that several dozen United Methodist congregations will be exiting during this annual conference season as votes are made on their disaffiliation. Some of these UMC dis-affiliates have indicated a desire to join

with the Global Methodist Church once it forms. Some progressive congregations are moving in directions like the LGBTQ-affirming United Churches of Christ. Others will be independent... at least for now.

The delay has allowed time for coalition-building in Africa and the Philippines. In spite of Western-funded efforts to bolster support for the Christmas Covenant, appetite for a regionalized UMC seems to be very small in Africa. The formation of a Global Methodist Church is gaining traction against a psUMC denomination that will face a protracted period of change with no real vision for the outcome. The choice is not between change and no change. It is between *defined change* or *undefined change*.

2) The Global Methodist Vision is Focusing

I noticed that emerging Global Methodists, in many locations, lack interest in sweeping their annual conference into the movement. Being the “default” option would bring along congregations invested in the status quo. There is an inherent tension between the desire to build a large movement vs. the hope for a *focused* movement.

“If you just want to change the name over your door, please don’t come.” These words by Jeff Greenway express hope that the Global Methodist Church will be significantly different than the UMC we have known. A key difference is to be found in expectations around discipleship. There is a deep desire to reclaim the original Methodist vision of intentional Christian small-group formation. Feeding this vision are recent work by folks like Kevin Watson on the Wesleyan Class and Band meetings.

Large-scale class and band meeting systems, however, have not existed in Methodism for well over 100 years. The rise of the Sunday School movement eclipsed Wesley’s original model. This, in turn, was eclipsed by a system of small groups based on a method designed to provide mega-churches with relationship, care, and formation (in that order, I think). Would Wesleyan class meetings and band meetings even work today? Wesley’s groups, after all, existed in the context of a larger revival. Could they be multiplied and made effective without it?

All these questions surfaced on a floor debate over a report on Accountable Discipleship at the WCA Legislative Assembly. One gentleman stood to push against the idea that Sunday School is dead. It is very much alive, especially in the U.S. South, and the model works, he argued, if done correctly. Others took the floor to take issue with the idea that the class and band meetings should be the only model. One quote, parodying U.S. political discourse, sticks in my mind: “If you like your current plan, you can keep it.”

I find it fascinating the Wesley’s model of discipleship seems strange and sometimes threatening to us. Class meetings, a primary organizational unit of Methodism, have all but disappeared from the U.S. landscape. But they are, in many ways, the inspiration behind all more recent small group movements. Band meetings (what we might call “accountability

groups”) have never existed in many UM congregations. The questions seems to be how specifically to push a single discipleship model and how firmly to insist on participation in such a system as a qualification for membership.

3) The Global Methodist Church is Not Yet

It will come as no surprise to Team Caffeine readers that we are stuck. A major plan of separation requires General Conference action and the dates for such a meeting have been pushed back to August/September 2022. There are rumors that General Conference 2022 will be cancelled altogether. These reports, I am assured, are the work of Centrist Institutionalists seeking to goad impatient traditionalists into leaving early. The Commission on General Conference is operating under the assumption of a mandate to hold GC2022. For the most part, those gathered in Montgomery seems resigned to the 2022 timeline. There was hope expressed that the Commission on General Conference would utilize creative approaches for full-participation as necessary. The WCA Legislative Assembly modeled a mix of virtual and in-person gathering. Despite a somewhat rocky start, everyone (it seemed to me) was empowered to fully participate.

One option is to start the Global Methodist Church now and allow congregations to begin joining as they are able (see our discussion of comity agreements last week). The problem with this approach is that the Protocol legislation only grants its provisions to denominations formed under the Protocol. **If the GMC forms now, it does not qualify as a Protocol denomination later.** This is not primarily about the \$25 million financial settlement. It is about the ability for annual conferences and local churches to vote themselves into the GMC under the Protocol’s provisions related to the trust clause, pensions, etc. This is a much bigger deal. Local church properties are valued at over \$60 billion.

There was plenty of hallway chatter about some sort of liminal vessel for exiting churches to join until the Protocol becomes a reality. My idea is a [Provisional Emergency American Central Conference](#) (PEACC). A Provisional Central Conference is described in our polity as a transitional unit that can be formed between General Conferences. Its existence expires at the close of General Conference unless renewed or recognized. An “American” Central Conference, (like so much blatantly happening in the UMC today), is clearly not allowed in our polity. But declaring it as formed would be a way to state the current actions of some UM bishops are not acceptable. If we have to choose between a theological crisis, a legal crisis, or a polity crisis, I believe a crisis of polity is to be preferred.

The status of the Protocol was discussed at length. Those most gifted at counting General Conference votes (the same people that predicted the outcome of GC2019 within a five-vote margin) are satisfied that the support needed to pass the Protocol amply exists. I was walked through the numbers and I concur. It is worth noting that, to date, there has surfaced no organized Protocol resistance.

As noted elsewhere, U.S. traditionalist bishops continue to talk down the Protocol. These folks do not want to see the teachings of the UMC radically changed and are uncomfortable with the vision of the episcopacy expressed by the GMC. One friend described these bishops as more concerned about their seat on the bus than where the bus is headed. I would characterize them as dyed-in-the-wool institutionalists distraught for the church that selected them to govern. For all their legitimate concerns for church unity, these bishops do not have much of a constituency. Those who share their love the institution are committed to the Protocol as a doorway to the psUMC. Those who share their traditionalism are committed to the Protocol as a means to the GMC. *Traditional Institutionalists* have become birds of extremely rare plumage.

For Centrist Institutionalists, the ideal scenario is the exit of key traditionalists before GC2022... just enough, say, to argue that the Protocol is not needed after all. [Some believe](#) we are seeing a concerted move against traditionalist congregations and clergy as a means to achieve that end. This includes four Korean pastors (the pastor of the largest church in New Jersey and three Cal-Pac pastors). But I don't see how this strategy can do anything but reflect poorly on the institution it is designed to protect. The exit of U.S. traditionalists does nothing to improve the minority status of progressives within the UMC. Actually, GC delegate math is such that loss of U.S. traditionalists from progressive conferences will mean *lower* delegate numbers for progressives. With the hope of a U.S. regional conference seriously in doubt, I look for some Centrist/Progressives to realize that the formation of a large Global Methodist Church (six or seven millions members) via the Protocol is actually their best play for the U.S.-based United Methodism they hope to create.

There is, however, another way. General Conference 2022 could approve [a new constitution](#) that transforms the United Methodist Church into the United Methodist Communion of Churches. This would allow several new denominations to form with continuing connection (for those who wish it.) The current general church assets of the UMC would be shared and managed by a Governing Council populated from the new denominations. For now it looks like most of us will be in an uncomfortable waiting pattern until GC2022. In the meantime, don't be surprised if a few stop-gap measures for a limited release of congregations are negotiated.