

April 22, 2021

*[Note: This is an improved, corrected, and expanded version of an e-mail that went out on April 22 to subscribers to PeopleNeedJesus.net. I am making this available here in the interest of fairness, improved tone, and increased accuracy. All the people mentioned in this e-mail, I am sure, love Jesus and the church. The events of the recent weeks have been troubling. Outside Georgia, I know of four Korean pastors facing negative consequences for stating their intentions with the Global Methodist Church. There is a reason why some believe it is time to consider the Comity Agreements mentioned in this message as a way of relieving tensions. May the Holy Spirit guide us all through this season. Because People Need Jesus, Chris Ritter]*

Team Caffeine,

Happy Thursday. As always, a big greeting goes out to our TC members.

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<https://peopleneedjesus.net/2021/04/17/um-fallout-a-compendium/>

## Mount Bethel

As shared last week, the situation in the North Georgia Conference has all the ingredients for a denominational supernova. It is American United Methodism’s largest conference with lots of assets in play. The presence of a liberal seminary (Candler, my *alma mater*) has trended the clergy pool in North Georgia in a direction more progressive than the laity. At the same time, I conjecture that just as many clergy have graduated from Asbury as they sought a more traditional grounding in Christian ministry. The large population base and significant growth of the Atlanta Metro area has provided opportunities for high-octane Evangelical pastors to build large, successful congregations with major facilities and funding. A polarized political climate in Georgia provides an unhelpful back-drop to deep denominational divisions. Add to the mix a progressive and institutional-minded bishop who has a clear vision for the future and seems willing to play hardball. The stage is set for a rupture in United Methodism to begin before an orderly separation agreement can be reached at General Conference.

As I understand it, the lead pastor of Mt. Bethel, Dr. Jody Ray, was informed on April 5 that he was being reassigned by Bishop Hauptert-Johnson to a new conference staff position focused on race relations. The largest church in the North Georgia Conference, Mt. Bethel and its affiliated school together have over 300 employees. Succession plans for a church like this generally take months and years, not days and weeks. It is also unusual to appoint someone to a conference staff position they have shown no interest in serving. This seems an unusual process for

staffing a position concerning race relations (an area in need of Georgia's best efforts!) and also a questionable process for a large congregation like Mt. Bethel. Lonnie Brooks, a long-time lay member of the Alaska Conference and a Centrist, commented online to a posting of a [Walter Fenton WCA article](#):

*Assuming that Walter has reported the facts accurately, which I have no reason to believe is not a good assumption, then the bishop seems to have ignored a critical piece of the Discipline's call for consultation in appointment making. Here's the relevant and applicable part: "¶ 426. Consultation and Appointment-Making—Consultation is the process whereby the bishop and/or district superintendent confer with the pastor and committee on pastor-parish relations, taking into consideration the criteria of ¶ 427, a performance evaluation, needs of the appointment under consideration, and mission of the Church. Consultation is not merely notification. Consultation is not committee selection or call of a pastor. The role of the committee on pastor-parish relations is advisory. Consultation is both a continuing process and a more intense involvement during the period of change in appointment.*

*1. The process of consultation shall be mandatory in every annual conference." At least two things here are critically important in this instance: 1) Consultation is not a matter to be undertaken at the discretion of the bishop, but it is "mandatory." 2) Consultation is "not merely notification."*

The clergy selected by the bishop to replace Jody Ray is Steven Usry, the pastor of Sugarloaf UMC. According to UM Data, Sugarloaf had an attendance of 475 (pre-COVID), compared to Mt. Bethel's 2336 weekly average attendance. Usry, by all accounts, is a committed traditionalist. What might be the motivation for replacing one traditionalist for another? One theory is that the bishop may be trying to consolidate traditionalist leadership in North Georgia in preparation for separation. Mt. Bethel's direction is not in doubt. They hosted the WCA Global Gathering three years ago and are assumed to one day be part of the new Global Methodist Church. Other churches in North Georgia, however, are potential battlegrounds in a UMC vs. GMC zero-sum-game. If a series of moves occurs that allow Centrist pastors to be assigned to battleground congregations, it would tip their scales decidedly toward the post-separation United Methodist Church. The mobility or even exit of traditionalists could (if that is what is happening) serve that larger aim.

Since ordained elders in good standing are guaranteed an appointment in the conference, a known way to exit a pastor is to appoint them to a job they are unwilling to take. (One progressive pastor shared in a UM clergy forum that this happened to him in Mississippi and caused him to seek opportunities in the Pacific Northwest). Pastors like Jody Ray are very employable elsewhere. This is why the Mt. Bethel saga is viewed by some as a decapitation strike against North Georgia traditionalists. Some, no doubt, suspect weaponized itineracy... mercenary connectionalism. In absence of evidence to the contrary, a growing number of North Georgia laity are crying foul.

The Staff-Parish Relations Committee at Mt. Bethel has informed the bishop that they are not open to the appointment of a new senior pastor at this time. In response, the bishop made the appointment change effective immediately on April 18. It is not clear what exactly happens next. Some are suggesting that this move by the bishop is doing what WCA and others have failed to do: Awaken the laity. At this writing, a Petition against the pastoral change has over 4,500 signatures.

In smaller congregations, the failure to accept the authority of the bishop has resulted in a lock-out of the congregation. I don't see how that is possible at Mt. Bethel. Legal force would certainly be met with legal force. Georgia laws, I am told, are generally unfavorable toward congregations seeking action against the denominational trust clause. Some have suggested the Mt. Bethel incident is an attempt to raid the assets of the congregation. While it is notable that the budget of Mt. Bethel UMC approaches that of the entire North Georgia Annual Conference, I would certainly hope this is not the case. But money is part of the story. Going back to 2015, Mt. Bethel [decided](#) as a congregation not to pay apportionments going to the Episcopal Fund.

Around the time Jody Ray was getting his phone call, the bishop and cabinet were issuing a five-page document called "[Love is Making Room](#)" in which the bishop and cabinet declared, as I read it, a desire to see implemented the One Church Plan throughout the annual conference. In a conference call with laity Monday night, Bishop Hauptert-Johnson stated the document is aspirational and that the 2019 *Book of Discipline* is still in effect.

Sugarloaf UMC seems prepared to welcome the new pastor being sent to them. Jody Ray is not blinking in spite of the fact that he will be subject to some sort of disciplinary process should the bishop choose to pursue charges of disobedience. Mt. Bethel will decide whose salary to pay based on their own internal processes. The North Georgia conference owes a paid appointment to Steven Usry, and our colleague is certainly in an unenviable position. In a similar case on a MUCH smaller scale here in Illinois, the conference ended up paying the appointed pastor for a period of months to show up and say a prayer each Sunday morning across the street from the church. In addition to the pastoral costs, the Illinois Great Rivers Conference spent \$125,000 in legal fees fighting for a building valued at \$30,000 (GCFA contributed \$15,000 of this). The conference won and sold the building back to the congregation for a fraction of its value. But no one really won... certainly not the Kingdom of God.

We must all work together to make sure the worst-case scenarios are not realized. This brings us to our next topic.

## Comity

A new word has surfaced in the current state of affairs in the UMC: **Comity**. Two articles, [one](#) by President Keith Boyette of WCA and [the other](#) by Florida WCA President Jay

Therrell, have suggested a way to end the current conflict is for the UMC to recognize the Global Methodist Church as an Evangelical denomination eligible for transfer of property. Boyette:

*Under paragraph 2548.2, a local church can deed a church's property to another evangelical denomination under a comity agreement. Such a transaction has to be approved by the annual conference. In one instance where this occurred, the local church was required to pay their proportionate share of the unfunded future pension liability as part of the transfer of the property. In the spirit of the Protocol, this provision could be a vehicle for the UM Church to use now to implement an amicable separation.*

Therrell:

*There's an easy way to end this now – without having to wait 16 months for General Conference. Paragraph 2548.2 of the Book of Discipline allows an annual conference to approve a comity agreement to allow churches to leave, join an “evangelical denomination,” and take their assets/property with them. Churches departing under the comity agreement must receive the approval of the bishop, district superintendents, and the district boards of location and building. Each annual conference could enter into a comity agreement allowing the traditionalist churches to leave under the exact same terms as the Protocol. The GMC could be launched to receive those churches and the impasse could be resolved.*

Heather Hahn of United Methodist News Service picked up on Keith Boyette's suggestion in [a side-bar](#):

*In [a recent column](#), Boyette suggested departing churches might use another part of the Book of Discipline, which allows a local church to deed a church's property to another evangelical denomination under a comity agreement. He envisions that the Global Methodist Church might have such a comity agreement with The United Methodist Church. As with other provisions, this form of departure would require annual conference approval and churches also could end up paying a large sum of money.*

The most [high-profile exit](#) of a church under Par. 2548.2 was Grace Fellowship in Katy, TX. This congregation left to join the Free Methodist denomination. What Keith Boyette and Jay Therrell are recommending is that the UM conferences recognize the GMC as an “evangelical” denomination into which property can be transferred. The Transitional Leadership Council would need to turn on the engine room of the Global Methodist Church so as to receive property. Negotiations with annual conferences would likely include guarantee of payment of unfunded pension liabilities assessed to the local church. Hopefully, the rate of calculation would be more favorable (as in the Protocol) than the high “market rate” currently assessed under the Disaffiliation Legislation.

The advantage of the Comity Agreement approach is that it could be accomplished long before General Conference 2022. Annual conferences who release congregations motivated toward exit may stave off the divisive conference-level voting on affiliation enabled by the Protocol. This might be attractive to conferences that are more equally divided. Traditionalists would abandon hope of “winning” their conference in exchange for an expedited exit. Some conferences will welcome this as a way to minimize losses. Division *now* may be much lower profile than division *later*.

In many U.S. conferences, delegate elections were swept by Progressives, especially among the clergy. A significant number of traditionalists congregations could leave the UMC without affecting the General Conference delegate math. But traditional-leaning *conferences* will likely want to stay in the UMC for now and negotiate an approved exit for the entire conference as a unit. It is not clear what thoroughly Progressive conferences might have to gain from a comity agreement with the GMC... other than fairness and goodwill. Hopefully that is enough. All things considered, the Comity Agreement route would likely serve as a solution for only a patchwork of Methodists in the United States. Others will need to wait until General Conference in August 2022 to see what might be approved there.

Turning on the lights now to the GMC would be an interesting proposition. There is, as you may know, [a transitional Book of Discipline](#) already prepared. Unlike the *WCA Draft Book of Doctrines and Discipline*, the transitional *Discipline* is much closer to that of the UMC. Congregations joining now would be placed, I assume, in a newly-formed provisional conference of some sort. Episcopal oversight would need to be provided by the bishops on the Transitional Leadership Council. The Global Methodist Church intends to release the trust clause on properties to the local church, but it is unclear if this could be accomplished prior to a GMC convening conference. Local churches will need to decide if a season in denominational limbo is preferable to staying in the UMC through 2022. Some of our friends in North Georgia, I expect, would opt to leave sooner rather than later.