

May 24, 2021

Team Caffeine,

Happy Monday. I hope this Aldersgate Day finds your hearts strangely warmed. I am discouraged when I look at where we are. But I am encouraged when I look at where we have been and where we are going. Spend some time today thinking about John Wesley and the movement he led. What would it look like if something similar happened today?

TC keeps growing. If you were forwarded this message from a friend, please consider this your official invitation to become a member of this community of church leaders seeking to faithfully navigate the seismic changes in Methodism. Your Team Caffeine \$5 per month membership supports the work of PeopleNeedJesus.net and provides you with an exclusive weekly posts like the one below. You may also receive the occasional “breaking news” bulletin when big events unfold. TC includes lay leaders, pastors, superintendents, and bishops eager for fresh analysis on the state of the UMC. To join, simply visit the following [this link](#).

On a whim, I dusted off and posted a blog that had been sitting in my draft folder for months. “[Two Methodisms: A Comparison Chart](#)” is currently blowing up with thousands and thousands of reads so far! I had to scramble to update it for the wide audience it was reaching. It goes to show that there is a vacuum for the kind of information People Need Jesus provides. Thank you for helping keep the lights on.

Because People Need Jesus,
Chris Ritter

Today...

A Denominational Game of Chicken

It happened again last week. Someone very close to a bishop called to let me know that General Conference 2022 will most likely be cancelled and that no General Conference is to be expected until 2024. “The complexities of General Conference and the lingering global effects of COVID-19 make plans for a global gathering next summer untenable. The odds of GC2022 are no better than 50/50.” This report is nothing new. So I did what I always do. I checked with a couple sources very near the action. One has the ear of the bishop that sits on the Commission on General Conference. I was reassured that all plans are moving forward toward August/September 2022 in Minneapolis.

Some of the rumors can be chalked up to the uncertainties of our times. But it will surprise none of you to learn that denominational politics are at play, too. Institutionalists want traditionalist leaders to exit now without the benefit of the Protocol. U.S. Centrists of an institutional stripe would love to be in the driver’s seat when the next General Conference rolls

around. The aim would be to re-organize in such a way as to avoid anything resembling a formal split. Rumors of further delays in General Conference seem designed to push impatient traditionalists over the edge.

Another front of our game of chicken has been increased pressure on traditionalist congregations and clergy. Three bishops have been using their appointive powers in ways seemingly designed to intimidate and inflame traditional groups within the UMC. That strategy (if that is what it is) is blowing up in their faces. All three bishops have been met with either a full-page-newspaper-ad protest, press scrutiny, or (in the Cal-Pac example) public demonstrations. I know of one bishop who, just last week, legitimately exited a traditionalist local pastor. He took steps to make sure the traditionalists caucuses understood this move was not motivated by ideology. It seems he did not want the same firestorm in his conference as is happening in California, New Jersey, and Georgia.

Those who want to retain control of the UMC institution run the risk of burning down the village in order to save it. Individual traditionalist congregations leaving the UMC (more every day) don't really do anything to change the basic delegate math at General Conference. And traditionalists are using the delay to their advantage -- working diligently on coalition-building for a new global denomination. Local groups headed toward the GMC are beginning to envision what life might be like on the level of the annual conference. These are key questions the GMC would not have been prepared to answer if General Conference were held last year as scheduled.

At the end of the day, Institutionalists still do not have a realistic alternative to the Protocol. To create peace within a UMC big tent, there need to be compartments. These compartments can only be created by amending our constitution. The Christmas Covenant pretends the U.S. would be at peace if only segregated from the rest of the world. Evidence is to the contrary. Supporters of the Christmas Covenant cannot internally agree on whether the plan is a substitute for the Protocol, a companion to the Protocol, or something that should happen after the Protocol is enacted. But there is not sufficient support for it under any of those three scenarios (unless a majority of the global church exits, which sort of defeats the whole point of regionalization).

I don't mean to speak of "institutionalism" as a moral negative. I am fairly institutional in my thinking (a recovering institutionalist?) It is when love for an institution translates into ill treatment of others that we have a problem. In many ways, PeopleNeedJesus.net is an archive of thought about the future of the UMC institution. When you run a blog, you are provided data on what is being read by others. This may be nothing, but lately I have noticed increased traffic on some of my older posts. This is a sign they are being shared around by others. One post from six years ago, in particular, stands out in this regard: "[A Case for Collaborative Connectionalism](#)." This post leading up to GC2016 represents the high water mark of my willingness to compromise ethics to keep us all in the same institution. I have moved on, but I wonder if others are fishing around for ideas.

If it is true that today's UMC institutionalists are arriving to the place I was six years ago, I look for a new model that allows congregations to choose their annual conference and annual conferences to choose their jurisdiction. Related to this would be a provision allowing jurisdictions the ability to adapt the *Book of Discipline*. I called this the "Organic Jurisdictional Solution" and submitted it to GC2016. But this, too, requires major constitutional amendments and leaves open significant questions in terms of branding. The traditionalist coalition would need to get behind such an effort and they agree with my current thinking: The UMC institution as does not deserve to be saved. As scary as this is to many of us, the UMC we know needs to give way to something qualitatively different.

Someday I might write a post relating various approaches to the UMC institution to the Stages of Grief. (This [recent post](#) comes close to that.) Those stages include denial, anger, depression, guilt, and negotiation. I look for all of these in abundance on the road leading up the next General Conference.