

**Stay UMC What are the Big Concerns?
Steve West (or maybe the larger group)?**

*What those withdrawing from the UMC to form a new Methodist denomination
may not be telling you*

The “Global Methodist Church” is not legally formed and is not operating at this time.

You may have the impression based on a well-designed website and mission statement that the “Global Methodist Church” (“GMC”) is a real entity. It is not, and there are many unknowns about how the church may function when it begins operating. The GMC is a *proposed* new denomination envisioned by those who wish to leave the United Methodist Church. Their [website](#) indicates that the proposed denomination will not necessarily follow the discernment processes of General Conference, stating that if it is “*apparent*” that those “*who covenanted to support the Protocol no longer do so, then the council will consider bringing the new church into existence without delay.*” In short, the GMC plans to secede from the UMC, whether or not the [*Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation*](#) passes.

An effective track-record is better than hopes of an ideal future.

The UMC is not perfect, and like all denominational groups in America, we have suffered decline. Yet we are the most evenly widespread denomination in the United States and the second largest Protestant denomination on the continent. We are praying for revival and renewal in our nation, and we believe it is coming by the work of the Holy Spirit in the post-separation UMC as well as other new expressions, such as the Global Methodist Church.

We believe that by separating from the main body of the denomination, we would reduce our capacity for shared ministry and mission. We believe that most Annual Conferences and local churches will choose to stay in the UMC and we wish to remain in connection with them. Dreams can be formed quickly, but are they the same as a proven track record of effective ministry?

The timing of the GMC’s withdrawal from the UMC is money-driven.

There are already provisions passed by the General Conference of 2019 that allow local churches to leave the denomination and retain their property. However, if the *Protocol* passes in its current form in 2022, the Global Methodist Church would then receive \$25 million dollars and the opportunity for a handful of our 54 Annual Conferences in the United States to vote to realign along with some of their assets. Local churches who wish to stay in the UMC would then be forced to hold a congregational vote to return to their own denomination. There may be additional financial advantages the *Protocol* would provide to churches seeking to leave, depending on legislation yet to be proposed. A March 2021 communication from the president of the North Alabama chapter of the Wesleyan Covenant Association (“WCA”) discusses these potential financial advantages for the GMC waiting to form, stating that *“for the majority of clergy and lay-persons with whom I have spoken in the last week, we are willing to wait.”*

The United Methodist Church is already global.

There are a number of Wesleyan and Methodist denominations in the world, numbering some 80 million members. The UMC is the largest of these bodies world-wide (12.5 million), and the total has grown slightly in recent years. It is the largest mainline denomination in the United States, the second largest Protestant denomination in the US (next to Southern Baptists), and the third largest Christian denomination in the US (next to Roman Catholics). While there are over 7 million United Methodists in the US, there are over 5 million members in other parts of the world. The UMC is already a global church, though it is largely funded by the churches in the United States. The proposed new “Global Methodist Church” is being fueled by a *minority* of United Methodists in the United States who are hoping to recruit members from other countries to form a new denomination. The UMC will continue its work around the globe long after the GMC secedes from the UMC.

Countless traditional United Methodists plan to stay in the UMC.

Those promoting the new “Global Methodist Church” fail to admit that many people who consider themselves traditional do not wish to leave our denomination. This is evidenced by the reference on the [GMC website](#) to *“leading bishops, centrists, and*

progressives” whose actions could spur so-called traditionalists to bring the new church into existence “*without delay.*” Millions of traditional United Methodists want to remain in the UMC because it is their home, and they would prefer to remain in a “big tent” denomination of traditionalists, centrists, and progressives and move forward in history, working out our differences in Christian love. Many traditional Methodists are not comfortable with the punitive and inflexible nature of the “traditional plan” that passed at General Conference in 2019, or otherwise disagree with objectives of the [Wesleyan Covenant Association](#) (WCA) they consider schismatic.

Young people might have a hard time with a new so-called traditionalist denomination.

We believe that no matter what we might disagree on regarding matters that are important (but secondary to the gospel of Jesus Christ and our historic creeds), the essence of what it means to be a Christian is to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. This is what Jesus said, and this what John Wesley said, too. We believe the very definition of God’s Church is that we are diverse and beautiful children of God, called to worship together and speak the truth in love to one another, at times “agreeing to disagree” (a term Wesley himself coined) but always with love. We are called to do this by remaining at the table together. We believe we must do this by loving, accepting, and affirming everyone who comes through our doors. Young people, especially, understand this and many will not participate in a church that they *perceive* as judgmental towards LGBTQ+ persons.

We have a passion for evangelism and for the revitalization of the church. Like those who plan to leave our denomination, we don’t want to remain caught up in issues that divide us. We believe the Holy Spirit will empower the post-separation UMC to move forward freely in history, plant many new churches, bring people to Jesus Christ, and follow the will of God.

We reject the idea that we can love people without accepting them for who they are. The Church in American culture is developing a reputation for intolerance, especially among young people, that is severely harming our witness in the United States. There are many unknowns in voting to become part of the Global Methodist Church and we believe there is real danger that the new denomination will become

too extreme. In any case, we do not believe that the vast majority of young people will be attracted to a new denomination that is built on lack of acceptance in its very DNA. We don't have all the answers about what we will do together in the future, but we believe that it is in the best interest of the North Alabama Conference to stay in The UMC.

Your church would have to spend money to remove the Cross and Flame.

Any new denomination, including the Global Methodist Church, would be strictly prohibited from using the Cross and Flame after the transition. Use of the Cross and Flame symbol on signage, stationery, buildings, websites, even stained glass windows in the new denomination is prohibited and would require removal, according to the [Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation](#).

Some churches could be left behind.

The UMC has had a long history of supporting small churches, inner city churches, rural churches, “fresh expressions,” and many other forms of church. These types of churches face an uncertain future. The appointment system would be dramatically changed. Multi-point charges that enable small churches to afford pastors could be disbanded. There are simply no guarantees (and there is certainly no system in place). In The United Methodist Church, we have demonstrated a history of facilitating local ministry in small and rural churches. Many of the leaders of the WCA and other breakaway Methodist organizations come from large membership churches who have the resources to do ministry on their own without denominational support and can bear the costs to transition into a new Methodist denomination themselves. In some cases, their churches have been withholding their tithes to The United Methodist Church and advocating for significantly lower giving in the future. We believe rural and small membership churches will feel the negative and unforeseen consequences of this the most.

This will be the first modern split of a US-based mainline denomination over *anticipated* changes.

Again, while the United Methodist Church is a global denomination, a majority of members (and the vast majority of its financial support) are from the United States. There have been denominational splits in recent decades over similar issues in

North America (e.g. Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians), but in every case a minority group left *after* decisions were made by the main body that dissidents could no longer live with. This is not the case in the present impasse in the United Methodist Church. Those who plan to leave our denomination are a minority of Americans who plan to do so *before* any of the changes they expect have been made to our Discipline.

The beliefs, structure, and future of the “Global Methodist Church” are unclear.

The GMC’s *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline* for the proposed new denomination deserves your attention, and you can read it [here](#). Previously published drafts of proposed Disciplines show significant differences, and the GMC website notes that the *Transitional Discipline* will be completely replaced after a new denomination is actually formed. The document also states that after the founding of the denomination, it will be two years before a local congregation may officially join it. Making a commitment to the GMC is staking a claim in a future that will not be clear for many years. The uncertainties are endless.

Subtle differences in essential Wesleyan theology between the UMC and GMC are appearing.

The proposed new “Global Methodist Church” is Wesleyan, but subtle differences in core theology are appearing. One example is the change in language in the *Transitional Discipline* regarding Wesley’s theology of grace (see Par. 102). Traditionally, United Methodists consistently understand Wesley’s teaching on grace as the gift of God expressed in three ways: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. Sermons, curriculum, and even Emmaus talks are based on this understanding of the gracious initiative of God which woos us, transforms us, and grows us continually toward perfection in love. Grace is undoubtedly the most central theme of Wesleyan spirituality.

The *Transitional Discipline* exalts Wesley’s infrequently used language of “convincing grace” – traditionally interpreted by scholars as one feature of prevenient grace – to become a second of four ways of grace. In addition, the document speaks of glorification in grace, effectively a fifth way of grace and an

additive to Wesley's language. This interpretation represents increased emphasis on both conviction of sins and the rewards of heaven and seems to be an attempt to *correct* what Wesley actually said in his foundational sermons, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" and "The Means of Grace." This theological twist is rooted in American evangelicalism and is not the traditional interpretation of Wesley's teaching. It is not taught in *any* of our 13 United Methodist seminaries.

The *Transitional Discipline* includes nebulous provisions for "congregational fidelity" to bring congregations into "conformity" with the GMC.

A section entitled "Congregational Fidelity" has been included in the new *Transitional Discipline*. The language is in Par. 351 and is included here in its entirety:

Should a congregation consistently advance doctrines or engage in practices not in conformity with this Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline, the Transitional Leadership Council or its successor shall have the authority to effectuate such a change independently, provided that the following provisions are met: 1. If the current pastor of the congregation is promoting doctrines or practices contrary to those of the Global Methodist Church, the bishop shall remove the pastor and appoint a pastor who will promote and defend the doctrines and practices of the Global Methodist Church. The bishop shall then allow time for the new pastor to bring the congregation into conformity. 2. If step one proves unfruitful or the pastor is not contributing to the problem, the bishop and presiding elder (district superintendent) shall meet with the church council (or its equivalent) or a larger group of the congregation to identify areas of disagreement over Global Methodist Church doctrines or practices, seeking a resolution of such disagreements and restoration of conformity by the local church. The bishop shall winsomely defend and teach the doctrines and practices of the Global Methodist Church in such engagements. 3. If a resolution of the disagreement proves unattainable, the local church may be involuntarily disaffiliated from the Global Methodist Church by a two-thirds vote of the Transitional Leadership Council or its successor, by agreement of the bishop, and by an affirmative vote of the cabinet of the conference in which the local church is located.

This could have *huge* implications for your local church if it chooses to align with the GMC, or if the *Protocol* passes and the Annual Conference votes to withdraw from the denomination and align with the GMC.

The GMC Discipline contains provisions for laity to be put on trial for disobedient practices.

In all fairness, there are provisions in the current *United Methodist Discipline* for laity to be put on trial for removal of their membership, though trials for laity rarely occur. Most trials involve clergy and clergy orders. These provisions were adapted for the new GMC's *Transitional Discipline* (Par. 807-818) for reasons which may be inferred by examining two subtle changes that strengthen the language. Both the *United Methodist Discipline* and the *Transitional Discipline* allow for laity to be charged with criminal activity, sexual immorality, financial mismanagement, and racial, gender, or sexual discrimination or harassment, as well as undermining the ministry of a pastor.

The two subtle changes are these. First, in the *United Methodist Discipline*, laity may be charged with “*dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church.*” In the *Transitional Discipline*, the language is expanded to “*promoting or engaging in doctrines or practices that are not in accord with those established by the Global Methodist Church.*” (Emphasis added). Second, an additional charge that may be made against laity has been added, “*disobedience to the order and discipline of the Global Methodist Church.*”

Naturally, this has implications for laity who are not necessarily disseminating doctrine contrary to the Church's teaching, but whose “practices” are rendered “disobedient” to the denomination's “order and discipline.” For example, it might be possible in the GMC to summarily dismiss laity from membership based on their sexual preference.

Clergy may be forced to leave the North Alabama Conference.

According to the *Transitional Discipline*, if the *Protocol* passes and the North Alabama Conference votes to realign with the GMC, clergy who have previously taken ordination vows but who do not conform to the beliefs of the GMC would be

forced to leave their home conference. The document states that “*such clergy are expected to affirm the doctrines and Social Witness set forth in this Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline and they agree to abide by its discipline. Clergy not endorsing these statements should align with a different expression of Methodism that fits more closely with their doctrinal and/or ethical understanding.*” The appointment process is detailed in Par. 509-514. Stay UMC is focused on keeping the North Alabama Conference in the United Methodist Church because we believe we are better together, all traditionalist, centrists, and progressives working as one to be the hands and feet of Christ in our world.

Finding a pastor in the GMC will *not* be the same.

The GMC’s clergy appointment process appears uncertain due to remarkable differences between the *Transitional Discipline* and previous drafts of a new Discipline. The GMC’s *Transitional Discipline* indicates two notable changes:

1. Appointment-making across conference lines will be encouraged “*as a way of creating mobility and open itinerancy.*” There is more likelihood that your church will receive a pastor from another part of the country, and likewise that GMC clergy may be required to move their families away from North Alabama to find a GMC congregation.
2. The *Transitional Discipline* explicitly states that “*neither elders nor deacons shall have the right to a guaranteed appointment.*” The case is made that this would improve clergy effectiveness.

There is real danger that without guaranteed appointments, there will be unintended side effects, such as leaving female pastors and persons of color without an appointment, or clergy experiencing long periods of unemployment. The appointment process would not be annualized; the *Transitional Discipline* states that “*appointments to charges may be made at any time deemed advisable by the bishop and cabinet.*” Another significant side effect is that clergy who are not under appointment will immediately be considered inactive and lose their vote at Annual Conference. This appears to give bishops unprecedented authority to remove clergy voting privileges.

There may be less opportunity and support for educating pastors.

There is no doubt in our minds that the Global Methodist Church is not likely to be able to provide the incredible amount of educational opportunities that The United Methodist Church does through its affiliated colleges, universities, divinity schools,

and seminaries. Our Course of Study system is also a proven and effective curriculum through which many licensed local pastors have learned how to do ministry. Our Ministerial Education Fund assists pastors in the costs of attending school. Additionally, it appears from the stated lack of support for the Traditional Plan in February of 2019 that *none* of our 93 United Methodist colleges and universities (including Birmingham-Southern College), and *none* of our 13 United Methodist seminaries, would be interested in aligning with a proposed new denomination.

Pensions for clergy moving to the GMC risk being underfunded in the future.

The new polity proposed by the GMC exposes clergy to the risk of clergy pensions being underfunded in the future. Assuming the passage of the *Protocol* and that the GMC keeps its clergy benefits program under management by Wespath as expected, the funds held by Wespath for clergy in both denominations would be sequestered from one another at the time of separation (See Questions 2 & 3 [here](#)). Currently, in the UMC, if a church disaffiliates from the denomination, they are obligated to pay for the unfunded pension liability of the clergy benefits program (Par. 2553.4.d). In its proposed *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Disciplines*, the GMC attempts to do the same thing in Par. 903.2. The difference, however, will be the legal authority to enforce the payment of unfunded pension liabilities. The UMC has a trust clause, giving each Annual Conference legal ownership of local church property. The GMC does not (Par. 902). The GMC states that its recourse will be to impose a lien against the church property of the disaffiliating church not meeting its unfunded pension liabilities. This is much weaker legal footing to enforce payment. Such a lien may not be granted by the courts and could be difficult to collect even if granted, especially if the disaffiliating church does not sell its property in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, due to the legal costs involved, the GMC may choose not to pursue such liens and instead simply absorb the unfunded pension liability, leaving clergy pensions in a weaker position. The costs for reimbursing unfunded pension liabilities can be substantial.

There is real danger that churches wishing to be independent of a denominational structure may see this as a pension liability loophole by which they may obtain independence at little or no cost.

The “Transitional Leadership Council” wields much power in the proposed GMC.

A group called the “Transitional Leadership Council” within the proposed GMC has endowed itself with broad powers. According to the *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Disciplines*, the Transitional Leadership Council shall have the power to:

- Override local church teachings (Par. 351)
- Disaffiliate local churches (Par. 351.3)
- Act as a clearinghouse, vetting local churches breaking from their Annual Conferences or other structures (Par. 352.2-3)
- Assign initial Annual Conferences, districts, pastoral appointments (Par. 352.4)
- Direct connectional funding (Par. 352.4)
- Oversee pastors kept in their same appointment during a transition to the GME (Par. 352.5)
- Adjust the “effective date” of affiliation of a church or Annual Conference to the GME (Par. 352.6)
- Control the educational fund (Par. 411)
- Exercise ultimate authority over professional endorsements that require denominational support, such as chaplaincy (Par. 413)
- Decide which clergy from the UMC may affiliate with the GME (Par. 417.2). This includes licensed local pastors, which will not automatically be licensed should they choose to affiliate with the GME (Par. 417.3). Pastors will undergo an “evaluation” overseen by the Transitional Leadership Council (Par. 413.3)
- Grant exceptions to chosen individuals during the ordination process (Par. 417.6)
- Control the salaries of bishops (Par. 505.1-2)
- Provide funding for a specific bishop through the giving of a different episcopal area (Par. 505.3)
- Make pastoral appointments until bishops are assigned (Par. 509.6)
- Determine the number of bishops (Par. 515)
- Decide which bishops from the UMC may transfer to the GMC (Par. 516.1)
- Assign additional Annual Conferences to a single bishop (Par. 516.1)
- Appoint bishops to a vacancy or even other individuals to function as bishops (Par. 517)
- Exhibit authority over bishops in leaves of absence (Par. 519), complaints against bishops (Par. 520.2, Par. 806, Par. 810.1.b, Par. 813.1), evaluating bishops (Par. 613.2.f) and defrocking bishops (Par. 520.3)
- Determine which ecumenical organizations to affiliate with (Par. 522)
- Nominate key leaders for the “Convening General Conference” (Par. 605)
- Act as clearinghouse for petitions made at the “Convening General Conference” (Par. 607)
- Exhibit authority over “Regional Conferences” (Par. 609)
- Exhibit oversight over Annual Conference financial and benefit committees (Par. 613.3.d)
- Assume immediate supervision of Annual Conferences that disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. This would include many churches who do not wish to follow their Annual Conference to affiliate with the GMC, making them temporarily subject to their rules and supervision. (Par. 614.1)
- Set connectional giving rate (Par 614.3)
- Exercise authority over newly forming Annual Conferences (Par. 614.5)

- Make “all necessary decisions related to the forming of the Global Methodist Church.” (Par 702.1)
- Add additional members to its ranks (Par. 702.3)
- Continue to exist beyond the “Convening General Conference” if not specifically disbanded by this Conference (Par 702.4)
- Review and exercise authority over groups it has empowered for specific functions (Par. 703.1)
- Hire staff (Par. 703.2.t)
- Appoint and oversee “Transitional Connectional Commissions” (Par. 704, 705)
- Prohibit gay persons in committed, monogamous relationships from being paid staff of the GMC (Par. 704.5)
- Suspend ministries of clergy under complaint or investigation (Par. 808.2)
- Approve the rules of the judicial body of the church (Par. 818)
- Appoint members to the highest judicial body of the church in the transition (Par. 820.2) and nominate members to the same body for approval at the Convening General Conference (Par. 820.6)
- Act as collection agency for and final arbiter of unfunded pension liabilities due by churches choosing to disaffiliate with the GMC, including taking secular legal action to take liens against church property (Par. 903.2-3)
- Act as legal steward over the GMC name and logo (Par. 904)
- Act as legal representative for the entire GMC (Par. 908)
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We understand the “Transitional Leadership Council” is intended to be temporary. However, many statements in the proposed *Transitional Book of Doctrine and Disciples* refer to the Transitional Leadership Council “*or its successor.*” See Par. 351. Likewise, this group has considerable power over the “Convening General Conference” (Par. 605, 607, 614.4). In any organization, the structures and norms that are operative at initial stages of development tend to become the default. Thus, it could be a mistake to assume these powers will be *limited, necessary,* and *temporary.* It may be better to understand these powers as *indicative* of the direction of the GMC. We believe this represents a significant departure from genuine Christian conferencing in the Wesleyan tradition. Our concern is with the scope of the powers rested in a single, self-appointed (Par. 702.2) body of the church. It is a historic departure from organization of the UMC that happens at many different levels, including districts, agencies, boards and committees, jurisdictions, conferences, and other decision-making bodies.

The future of the United Methodist Church is bright and will be enriched by traditionalists, centrists, and progressives doing the work of the Church together.

Institutional conflict distracts from ministry. We believe the United Methodist Church will enter a period of growth after the dust of schism settles. The UMC can continue its focus on reaching diverse people for Christ with open hearts, open minds, and open doors. We also wish the GMC well and trust that they will touch many lives.

Our founder, John Wesley, coined the phrase “agree to disagree.” We choose to remain in the United Methodist Church, value our diversity of thought and life, and negotiate the changes necessary to contextualize ministry in today’s world.