

US vs. THEM: Agree to Disagree or Part Ways

Rise & Shine, February 2nd

1 Corinthians 1:10, 12-13

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ... What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Questions:

1. When does a difference in opinion rise to the level of unresolvable conflict? Have you ever been able to maintain a relationship while not resolving differences that you initially thought rose to this level?
2. What is a disagreement in the Episcopal church that could use the work of a mediator?
3. How have you seen God use mediation (or means) to do God's work in the world?
4. When has God used you as a mediator to do God's work in the world?

In the News

Helped by Mediator Feinberg, United Methodist Opponents Craft Separation Protocol to End Long Dispute

Mediator Kenneth Feinberg, the man who served as Special Master of the U.S. government's September 11th Victim Compensation Fund and, more recently, was hired by Boeing to oversee distribution of \$50 million to support 737 MAX crash victim families, may also turn out to be the man who helped members of The United Methodist Church end its long impasse over LGBT issues.

That impasse has been roiling that denomination since 1972, just four years after it was formed from a merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren. The basis of the UMC at its formation was organizational unity (connectionalism) with a commitment to theological diversity. Simply put, the goal was to create a "big tent" church structured in a

way to bring together Christians with similar but different interpretations of theology, scripture, and practice.

United Methodists believe that God's love for humans is not limited by their sexual attractions, and thus LGBT (an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual) people should be welcomed to worship God with them. However, most progressives within the church believe that LGBT persons who are Christians and feel called to the ministry should be permitted to serve as clergy, and that United Methodist pastors should be able to officiate at same-sex marriages. Conversely most traditional United Methodists, while continuing to believe that God's love for humans is not limited by their sexual attractions, also believe that the Bible supports their restrictions on same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay persons.

Most have now concluded that a resolution of the standoff within the 13 million-member church will not involve a coming together of conflicting parties but will mean an "amicable" split: an agreement to separate. New York Conference Bishop Thomas Bickerton, part of the group working with Feinberg, underscored intensifying divisions. "It became clear that the line in the sand had turned into a canyon," he said. "The impasse is such that we have come to the realization that we just can't stay that way any longer."

In advance of this year's General Conference, set for May 5-15, several proposals have been floated to end the impasse, but the one announced January 3, titled "Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation," which was hammered out with Feinberg's help by 16 church members representing various factions within the church, has gained the most traction.

"This protocol provides a pathway that acknowledges our differences, respects everyone in the process and graciously allows us to continue to live out the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, albeit in different expressions," Bickerton said.

Observers close to the situation say that at least some of the provisions of the protocol will likely be included in whatever the General Conference ends up adopting as a way forward.

Feinberg, who worked *pro bono* with the ad hoc group that developed the proposal is credited with keeping the opposing parties at the table. "He was able to use his expertise to help us hear one another, see possibilities that no one had seen or been prepared to admit, and understand what was really at

stake," said Rev. Keith Boyette, who was one of the representatives of traditionalist groups at the negotiations.

The main provision of the proposal is that the denomination split into two bodies, with the traditionalist congregations forming a new Methodist denomination and being supported in doing so by \$25 million from funds of the existing church, as well as keeping their local church properties. The centrists and progressives would continue as The United Methodist Church.

Procedurally, there are several hurdles the protocol must clear before it can be presented to General Conference as a legislative proposal, but the participants at the meeting that created it, while representing opposing constituencies, have pledged to support this plan to the exclusion of others.

Legislative procedures being what they are, however, make it likely that even if the protocol does reach the General Conference floor, it will have some amendments before it is voted upon.

Feinberg said he was motivated to help by his "interest in modern America, in preserving some church impact and influence in an increasingly secular society."

1 Corinthians 11:18-19

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

Philemon 1:10-11, 17

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ... So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Prayer for the Unity of the Church (BCP p.818)

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify *you*; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.