

Looking to the Future of The United Methodist Church and Our Mission and Ministry at Canton First UMC

(Canton, GA, June 10, 2021)

Canton First Family and Friends,

You have likely heard rumors and opinions around some of the recent issues and actions within our denomination and the North Georgia Conference. Rand Bagwell (Admin Board Chair), Don Towers (Lay Leader), Pastor Kelly, and I would like to share with you, our church leaders, staff and members, a few thoughts to put things in proper perspective.

As you probably know, Canton First is part of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. Our clergy and elected lay delegates meet in June each year at Annual Conference to act on legislation and policies for our area. The North Georgia Annual Conference is just one entity of the General Conference, a gathering of clergy and laity from United Methodism around the world that meets every four years to enact policy. The General Conference is the only body authorized to make policy and speak for the denomination.

The 2020 General Conference was postponed due to COVID and rescheduled for August 29 - September 7, 2021. It was to be an in-person conference to address several key issues. Unfortunately, this session of General Conference was also rescheduled to August 2022 due to COVID-19. This is especially disappointing because many of us expect the next conference to be a "historic" legislative session. A little history will help to understand the significance.

The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged in 1968 becoming the United Methodist Church, one of several denominations within the family of the Wesleyan movement. In hindsight, contrary to what our name implies, there has been a consistent divide between our denomination's conservative and liberal members in the understanding of some of the Church's historic teachings, specifically the authority of scripture and the nature of human sexuality. This division has continued to widen over the years.

At the 2016 General Conference and the 2019 Special Called Session the divide over human sexuality, the definition of marriage, and the standards for ordination were the "front and center" topics. Despite much discussion and prayer, there was no clearly defined path toward resolution and the Conference voted to uphold the current language in the Discipline that states a traditional view of marriage and church doctrine.

After the 2019 Session, key UMC leadership representing both traditional and progressive viewpoints worked together to prepare a roadmap out of the conflict. The *Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation* addresses the needs and wishes of individual conferences and congregations to choose their affiliation and includes a procedure for retaining assets and property. Supporters of the *Protocol* all believe that with graceful separation, progressives and traditionalists can move beyond the conflict and allow both sides to embody an expression of Methodist Christianity that reflects their convictions. Recently, as the dialogue and division have intensified, the North Georgia Conference Leadership has expressed an opinion and direction for our Conference that is contrary to the Book of Discipline and will be more aligned with the progressive view. However, it is important to remember that such an alignment would require significant changes in the UMC Book of Discipline, which can only be made by the General Conference. At this point you are likely wondering, "So, what should we do?"

First, don't give up. It is easy to get frustrated and want to simply walk away from it all. But please don't. We at CFUMC will stay focused on our mission of Sharing Life – Sharing Christ – For Others. Continue loving and serving

one another. Continue supporting the ministries of your church with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

Second, stay informed and listen carefully and fairly to all sides.

- The liberal perspective is represented most prominently by the Reconciling Ministries Network (rmnetwork.org) and Liberation Methodist Connection (thelmx.org).
- UMC Next (umcnext.com) considers themselves to take the moderate view.
- The Wesleyan Covenant Association or WCA (wesleyan covenant.org) has been the predominate voice for traditional-minded clergy and laity.

Third, support the adoption of the *Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation*.

When General Conference votes to approve the *Protocol*, traditionalists hope to form a new denomination called the Global Methodist Church which will be aligned with our Wesleyan heritage. In the years to come, Global Methodists and United Methodists will receive millions of new Christ-followers who have no knowledge of the current traditional versus progressive conflict. They will simply be joining a denomination of like-minded Christians to follow Scripture and love God and neighbor as Jesus did. Most importantly, we will together focus on the spiritual renewal of our communities, nation, and world.

We will continue to share updates with you as more information becomes available.

May God bless you, our church, and our community,

Dr. Kenny Ott, Lead Pastor
Rev. Kelly Beckley, Executive Pastor
Don Towers, Lay Leader
Rand Bagwell, Administrative Board Chair