

Responding to Talking Points

By Thomas Lambrecht

An organization formed to promote the One Church Plan (OCP) at the special called 2019 General Conference has recently issued a dozen talking points in support of the OCP. Some of those talking points are true and worthy of consideration. Upon closer examination, however, other talking points are either misleading or do not tell the full story. Here are responses to the talking points, quoted from Mainstream UMC.

- **The OCP is faithful to Scripture and the example of the Apostles in Acts 15 of allowing different practices in different mission fields.**

The OCP changes the definition of marriage to "two adults" and affirms same-gender relationships. That can hardly be called "faithful to Scripture" (see Genesis 1:26-28; 2:23-25; Matthew 19:1-12; I Corinthians 6:9-11; Romans 1:21-27). The more applicable example from Acts 15 is the decision by Paul and Barnabas to honor each other as brothers in Christ, but separate to do ministry in different ways (vs. 36-41).

- **The OCP has been vetted by one of the most rigorous processes in our denomination's history, a faithful, two-year study by the Commission on the Way Forward.**

While the Commission did work on the One Church Plan, along with other plans, it never took a vote to endorse any of the plans. A lot of thinking and learning went into drawing up the details of all three plans, and they all benefited from that process. The Commission, however, did not endorse the OCP (nor either of the other plans).

- **The OCP has been recommended by nearly two-thirds of all active UM Bishops.**

The bishops who endorsed the OCP were primarily from the U.S. According to the information we received, bishops from the central conferences outside the U.S. generally voted against the OCP. This appears simply to be a North American "solution" recommended to a global church.

- **The OCP allows different regions in the U.S. to adapt to their mission field.**

One of the major shortcomings of the OCP is that it treats the disagreement over marriage and sexuality as a geographical problem, when it is really a theological problem. There are churches that would favor same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals in every annual conference. And there are churches in every annual conference that would find such an accommodation unacceptable. The OCP treats the minority position in any annual conference unfairly.

- **The OCP has no impact on the Central Conferences outside of the U.S.**

The OCP changes the definition of marriage to "two adults" or qualified as "traditionally understood as a union of one man and one woman." According to the Judicial Council ([decision 1185](#)), these definitions bind the church in its universal understanding of marriage and are not adaptable by central conferences outside the U.S. Our brothers and sisters outside the U.S. would be forced to live by and defend marriage as a union of two undefined adults. It is also unclear whether it is constitutional to allow different annual conferences to have different standards for ordained ministry - so can the central conferences really adapt the requirements of the *Discipline* to their own context?

- **The OCP retains the global structure of the church and shared critical ministries.**

Both the OCP and the Traditional Plan maintain the church's current global structure and ministries (different from the Connectional Conference Plan). Both plans, however, would need to recognize that significant structural changes would undoubtedly follow upon the loss of members, no matter which plan is passed. The Traditional Plan explicitly maintains a way for those departing the denomination to continue participating in the UM pension and benefit plans, as well

as mission partnerships, support, and cooperation The OCP contains no such provisions for any departing churches.

- **The OCP removes most of the controversial and hurtful language about LGBTQ persons.**

While the language is controversial and perceived as hurtful by some LGBTQ persons, the church has been forced by progressive advocacy to clarify its understanding of the biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality. It is unfortunate that much of the prohibitive language in the *Discipline* was needed because of the refusal of some annual conferences, clergy, and bishops to abide by the teachings and requirements of the church. What is often interpreted as hurtful is not the language itself (which can be tweaked), but the basic position of the church that same-sex relationships are not congruent with God's will for human flourishing. This is not a matter of removing language but of changing the church's understanding of same-sex relationships.

- **The OCP protects the conscience of individual bishops, conferences, pastors, and churches.**

These protections, however, are found in the regular part of the *Book of Discipline* that can be revoked by any future General Conference. In other denominations, when the affirmation of same-sex relationships has become the majority position, such conscience protections have been revoked. Some of those promoting same-sex marriage and ordination in our church have said they will not rest until such is affirmed by all parts of the church (including the central conferences outside the U.S.).

- **The OCP requires no votes by conferences or churches.**

While not requiring votes, the OCP sets up a situation where inevitably many annual conferences and local churches would have to vote. Every time an openly gay or lesbian candidate for ministry comes up in an annual conference, the clergy session (or in some cases the whole annual conference) would have to take a vote on whether or not to ordain a practicing homosexual. Every time a gay or lesbian member or relative of a member wants to get married in a local church (using the church's sanctuary), that local church would have to vote whether or not to allow the use of the church's property in a same-sex wedding. Any annual conference that does not initially ordain practicing homosexuals will be targeted by progressive advocates to change their position, with resulting controversies and votes year after year until the position in that conference is changed.

- **The OCP is financially faithful to pension commitments for active and retired pastors.**

The Traditional Plan is also financially faithful to pension commitments. Changes in the pension plan will be needed regardless of which plan passes General Conference. While the OCP envisions some local churches leaving the denomination, it provides no mechanism for churches to do so while keeping their property. This creates the conditions for unfair treatment of local churches by different annual conferences and the potential for widespread expensive litigation over property and trust clause issues.

- **The OCP puts an end to church trials.**

- **The OCP holds the denomination together to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.**

The idea that the OCP will prevent a separation in the denomination is a fond wish, but not grounded in reality. In fact, the North Georgia Annual Conference, which is generally more conservative in its rural areas and more progressive in its urban areas, took a survey this year as to how people might respond to the passing of either plan. It found that 5 percent of its conference members would seek to leave the denomination if the Traditional Plan passed, while 26 percent would seek to leave if the One Church Plan passed.

It would be wise of the General Conference delegates to acknowledge that no matter which plan passes, a significant portion of our denomination's membership is likely to depart. The delegates essentially face two decisions at the upcoming General Conference:

- 1) Does The United Methodist Church want to take a traditional or progressive approach to the issues of marriage and sexuality in the years ahead (which will determine the identity of the denomination)?
- 2) Will The United Methodist Church provide a gracious way for churches to depart with their property, while maintaining the financial integrity of the pension program?

Given that some amount of separation is likely to occur, will that separation be amicable or adversarial? Will local churches be treated fairly across all annual conferences, or depend upon the whim of their annual conference leaders and the individual circumstances of the church, creating the potential for widespread expensive litigation over property and trust clause issues?

Thomas Lambrecht is a United Methodist clergy person and the vice president of Good News. He also served as a member of the Commission on a Way Forward.