

Putting the Screws to United Methodism: the Case Against the Traditionalist Plan

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A summary of my thesis: African delegates to the General Conference of 2019 who may vote for the Traditionalist Plan in large numbers will have been duped.

To quote Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño:

Delegates from Africa [at GC 2012] once again proclaimed that their anti-homosexual stand was what U.S. missionaries taught them. I sat there wondering when our African delegates will grow up. It has been 200 years since U.S. Methodist missionaries began their work of evangelization on the continent of Africa; long enough for African Methodists to do their own thinking about this concern and others.

The sole focus of the Traditionalist Plan is grinding the axe of accountability to the Discipline in the hope that noncompliant clergy, bishops, and churches will take the nearest denominational exit to avoid punishment and/or shaming, exclusion, and funding cutoffs. This mass exit will leave the traditionalists in charge of a 'cleansed' and greatly diminished denominational structure.

After the Council of Bishops advised the Commission on A Way Forward *not* to develop the Traditionalist Plan from their initial 'sketch' or outline, the Council then decided to include this Plan as part of the Commission's report to GC 2019 at the insistence of a minority of bishops (who, presumably, did not endorse the 'One Church Plan' advocated by the majority).

The Traditionalist Plan was hatched at the last minute by a few bishops aligned with the Renewal and Reform Coalition, the dominant group that sets the conservative legislative agenda and backs a minority of American delegates determined to dismantle the UMC by driving out nonconforming clergy, bishops, and churches or by direct schism.

Despite their membership vow to be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries, the schismatic members of this Coalition and their allies have schemed to undermine and destroy it.

Because the Commission did not have time to develop the Traditionalist Plan or give it due consideration, it does not carry their imprimatur, but did receive the endorsement of nine of the thirty-two members.

The outcome of passing the Traditionalist Plan will be a shrinking core of aging 'true believers' in a declining church that is hostile to the human diversity of the wider world.

By focusing on this core group and driving away the majority of younger people, the traditionalists will weaken or eliminate ministries with future generations of children, youth, and young adults (including their own family members) who are more likely to include LGBTQ people who would not be welcomed and nurtured.

The Traditionalist Plan is actually their 'Plan A', an indirect approach to schism in the form of tightening the Disciplinary screws on 'renegade' clergy and 'rogue' and 'lesbian' bishops who, as a matter of conscience, have ignored, sidestepped, or declined to enforce the Discipline's exclusions, prohibitions, and penalties in matters of human sexuality.

The Traditionalist Plan would force nonconforming United Methodists to choose among the options of "hiding in the woodwork", renouncing their prophetic role, leaving voluntarily, or being forced or drummed out by the penalties prescribed for disobedience or for refusing to pledge allegiance.

The Coalition's 'Plan B', to be implemented at GC 2019 if their 'Plan A' fails, is a direct plan for immediate schism that is among the petitions submitted to the GC.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association has developed a contingency plan to create an 'orthodox' Wesleyan denomination as an alternative affiliation for schismatic churches, clergy, bishops, and annual conferences.

If GC 2019 passes the 'One Church Plan' (with a 'generous' or non-draconian exit plan reattached as the price of compromise), the Coalition's 'Plan B' for direct, immediate schism would allow them to form a new Methodist association and leave the United Methodist Church in the hands an alliance of centrists and progressives.

The Coalition (and the few conservative bishops who actually wrote the Traditionalist Plan) *would much rather exclude* the 'renegade' or nonconforming clergy and the majority of the Council of Bishops by imposing their 'Plan A' and thus 'capture and control' a shrunken version of the United Methodist Church.

But to ram the punitive and schismatic Traditionalist Plan through GC 2019, the Coalition and their episcopal allies (including some African bishops) will need every vote they can round up, including the votes of most of the African delegates.

To achieve the majority needed to pass their 'Plan A', the GC delegates from Africa are being induced to play a role in the Coalition's scheme to win a victory for totalitarian rule, but without fully understanding the ramifications of their vote for the resulting disruption/destructuring of the UMC or the racist implications of being 'played' to accomplish the ends of the Coalition.

The last great schism in American Methodism in 1844 was engineered by southern white racists who insisted that Bishop James Osgood Andrew be permitted to own slaves. It is ironic that the current schismatic Coalition is headed by southern white men who insist on discriminating against another minority group stigmatized as second-class human beings, but who need to enlist the support of African delegates to prevail.

Here are some of the elements of the cultural, religious, and political manipulation of the African delegates:

- In the dynamics of group conflict at the GC, the African delegates are a relatively powerless but growing minority voting bloc that is being enlisted by one influential subgroup to attack another influential subgroup that includes a majority of the Council of Bishops.
- The African delegates can gain power to influence the UMC to conform to their 'sexual orthodoxy' only by forging an 'unholy alliance' with a Coalition that patronizes them as junior members and temporary allies who can be ignored as soon as the vote is over.
- The Coalition is playing to the religious convictions of African delegates but without revealing their ulterior motives. Their public intent is simply "to maintain biblical standards for

theology and morality”, while their hidden agenda is to engineer a schism.

- The Coalition leaders view their African allies as politically and culturally unsophisticated and employ subversive political tactics to manipulate them with ‘undue influence’.
- For example, in 2008 the Coalition gave the African GC delegates American cell phones (a highly desirable perk in a foreign country) to give the Coalition immediate phone access to the delegates and score partisan political influence.
- In 2008 the Coalition offered the African delegates a “free breakfast” with discussion of how to vote on the upcoming legislation and promoted a conservative slate of candidates to the Judicial Council (the ‘Supreme Court’ of the UMC) that was elected. This is part of a pattern of seeking to wield ‘undue influence.’
- A joint monitoring team from the Commission on the Status and Role of Women [GCSRW] and the Commission on Religion and Race [GCORR] said the giveaway "is inappropriate behavior and it destroys community. We have gathered for Christian conferencing, which requires trust, honesty, openness and respect. Whenever there is an imbalance of power relationships with the expectation of reciprocity, this behavior gives the appearance of paternalism, manipulation, exploitation and of course, racism." [source: UMNews]
- Passing the Traditionalist Plan will allow the Coalition to retaliate against the “liberal” wing of the UMC by simply eliminating the GCSRW and GCORR and defunding United Methodist Women and the General Board of Church and Society, among other targets they have previously identified.
- The Traditionalist Plan is not in the best interests of the African delegates.
- By significantly reducing the size of the United Methodist remnant of a denomination, the Traditionalist Plan will decimate the core structures that have facilitated generous United Methodist financial support for Methodist work in Africa.
- Passing the Traditionalist Plan will sow the seeds of factionalism that will facilitate the Coalition’s retaliation against a large majority of American supporters of African Methodist work, including the majority of the Council of Bishops, whom the Coalition intends to force out of the UMC or into involuntary retirement.

- The African delegates' alliance with this small minority of politically and theologically right-wing voices [hint: think 'Trump voters'] is a political 'marriage of convenience' with forces determined to use the voting power of African delegates to sway the GC by counting on their political and theological naiveté.
- Many of the African delegates may be induced to 'hold their noses' and vote as a bloc for the Traditionalist Plan to honor the biases of their constituents despite their deeper personal insights into the spiritual wisdom of not doing so or fear of the cost of 'going against the tide'.
- The cultural legacy of western colonial domination in Africa is a Eurocentric epistemology, ontology, and ideology. "A cultural invasion ... fashioned from outside [Edem Kodjo]" destroyed indigenous African knowledge, cultures, and religious practices, leaving in their place a highly valued Westernized context for forming individual and communal social, cultural, and religious identity.
- The departure of the missionaries who organized African Methodist churches left behind a neocolonial regime of African bishops and district superintendents who compel conformity to church standards imported from the West.
- The American proponents of the Traditionalist Plan impose cultural imperialism through a top-down, "colonizing mindset" that treats African Methodists as a group that can be manipulated by promoting a self-reinforcing totalitarian theology of exclusion: the orthodox belief that individual conversion to a rigid belief system featuring a traditionally 'white' Jesus and access to western education is *the* Way to personal and financial self-improvement and a higher social status. Westernized, acculturated, and educated United Methodists are thus seen as Africans of higher status. And the elite members of this group are elected as GC delegates.
- To quote the Encyclopedia Britannica: "Fueled by a belief in the superiority of their own way of life, colonizers used law, education, and/or military force to impose various aspects of their own culture onto the target population. Motivated, in part, by a desire to purge local populations of allegedly barbaric, uncivilized customs and mores, colonizers also knew that the best way to mitigate resistance by the colonized is to eradicate as far as possible all traces of their former way of life."

- The “colonizing mindset” in American Methodism assumes white male superiority and historically has treated other groups as second-class human beings: females, underprivileged children, pagans, Jews, heretics, atheists, polygamists, impoverished immigrants without English language skills, and people of color, including Latinos, indigenous Americans, Asian laborers, and slaves from Africa and their descendants.
- More recently right-wing American religious voices have targeted sexual and gender minorities to manufacture hatred and promote legal punishment (including execution), scapegoating, terrorism, and torture in many African nations.
- From a cross-cultural perspective, imposing the Western ideal of life-long heterosexual monogamous marriage may be viewed in part as an attempt to constrain other indigenous African sexual practices (including polygamy and homosexual acts) that may reflect the Western cultural myth of black male sexual superiority that reduces the black male to a “penis symbol” (in Franz Fanon’s [1952] description of “negrophobia”). This is a core belief underlying the racism that supports an ideology of white male superiority.
- African GC delegates who may have a limited understanding of cultural, theological, and political differences with American Methodists are under pressure to vote from an ‘African context’ as defined by extremely conservative cultural intermediaries, a form of ideological servitude of the colonized mind.
- A heteronormative cultural context reinforced by imported African “homo hatred” is supported by a theologically naïve, judgmental proof-texting of certain Bible verses that are used to line up votes for the Traditionalist Plan.
- African church leaders have been sold the false notion that homosexuality is an imported Western perversion not found in Africa before the colonial period, despite significant anthropological research to the contrary.
- If enacted, the Traditionalist Plan will *not* encourage a nurturing, nonjudgmental, and healing context for African Methodists to engage in ministry to African LGBTQ adults, adolescents, and children in their midst. African GC delegates will be intentionally excluding LGBTQ individuals to “cleanse” their churches from the practice of homosexuality.
- The American backers of the Traditionalist Plan do not have the best interests of African Methodists at heart. They are simply

using the African delegates' votes to achieve passage of one of their two plans to fragment United Methodism, leaving a shrunken and declining remnant of a denominational body as the fiscal foundation for supporting the rapid growth of Methodism in Africa.

I do not question the personal integrity or the intelligence or the religious commitment of the African delegates to GC 2019. I simply suggest that in their narrow focus on fidelity to an orthodox version of their Christian faith within their belief system and in an African cultural context, they may not be well equipped to see the forest for all those damn trees blocking their view!

The strategic question for the African delegates is thus at hand: which version of the UMC is in their best interests? The One Church Plan that may result in the departure of their erstwhile Coalition allies or the Traditionalist Plan that is designed to force the departure of a much larger group of centrist and progressive United Methodists?

One small footnote to the above discussion: The Traditionalist Plan is an unintentional gift to us all. Once we grasp the defensive machinations of a shrinking, intolerant orthodox subgroup that intends to put the screws to the United Methodist Church, we can see with compassion into the depths of fear and hatred that are aroused in the face of what appear to be the death throes of their most cherished beliefs.

My prayer for all the delegates to General Conference in 2019 is this: may they be so open to the influence of the Holy Spirit that they become willing to let go of their most cherished assumptions, attitudes, and cultural values to discover the will of God for our common global life and work together and celebrate the gifts embodied in all of our human diversity.