On Friday, Jan. 3, a 16-member group, including representatives of eight of the major UMC-affiliated advocacy groups and eight bishops, released a proposal to General Conference 2020 that calls for an “amicable separation” of the United Methodist Church. Many of the major secular and religious media outlets who reported on this agreement strongly intimated that the announced “Protocol agreement” means that a split or schism in the UMC is a done deal. This, of course, is simply false.

To help our local churches assuage any misconceptions and confusion that may exist among their congregations and community, the Central Texas Conference has pulled together the following FAQ. This is not a comprehensive breakdown of “the Protocol Agreement.” Rather, it is intended to help clergy and lay leadership address questions regarding this proposal and the General Conference legislative process as well as provide a few resources for those who wish more details.

Has the United Methodist Church decided to split?
No. While many of the media headlines about the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation agreement indicated that the United Methodist Church had agreed to split, this is simply not the case. Only General Conference can make such decisions for the denomination and General Conference will not meet again until this May 5-15 in Minneapolis, Minn. The Protocol agreement is, at this time, just a proposal and is not official legislation that is scheduled to come before the 2020 General Conference (GC20). While there are paths for this proposal to become legislation, and many believe that the prescribed steps will be successfully completed so that it may be considered by GC20, “The Protocol agreement” has a long way to go before it can become the official way forward for the Methodist Movement and its more than 13 million global members.

If the decision to split or not split has not been made, what was announced last Friday (Jan. 3)?
A diverse, 16-member group, which included eight United Methodist bishops and eight representatives from centrist, progressive and traditionalist United Methodist advocacy groups, announced a plan to move the denomination beyond its decades-long impasse over same-sex marriage ceremonies in UMC churches and the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. The plan, known as the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation agreement, lays out an eight-page plan that would allow conferences and churches to leave the United Methodist church – with their assets and liabilities – and join a newly formed “traditional” Methodist denomination, or perhaps another Methodist denomination that is created. This plan is only a proposal and does not change the current structure of the denomination or the UMC Book of Discipline, nor does this proposal supersede or alter another plan proposing a new future for the Methodist Movement already properly submitted as legislation to General Conference.

What would “The Protocol agreement” do if it is passed by General Conference?
Legislation considered by General Conference is often amended during the General Conference committee and plenary voting processes. As such, there is no way to determine what changes, if any, “The Protocol agreement” would bring to the 13+ million-member denomination. However, as it is currently written AND in very, over-generalized terms, “The Protocol” allows for the creation of a new, traditionalist denomination and provides procedures for possible other Methodist denominations. There is money set aside for the creation of the traditionalist denomination ($25 million over 4 years) and additional funds for any other Methodist denomination ($2 million per) Annual conferences will be able to vote to join the newly formed traditionalist or any other newly created Methodist denomination. No vote would be needed if the Annual Conference wishes to stay in the United Methodist Church. If a local church/charge wishes to be a part of a denomination other than the one voted on by its Annual Conference, the local church/charge may vote to go another way. If no vote happens at either the annual conference or local church level, the conference/church will stay as a part of the existing UMC.
What does “The Protocol agreement” mean for our local church?
In the short-term, it means nothing tangible. The Protocol agreement is simply one of many proposals that may be considered by General Conference 2020. The United Methodist Book of Discipline has not changed, and the Central Texas Conference will continue to follow the Discipline as it is currently written. Most importantly, “The Protocol” does nothing to change our mission and Wildly Important Goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

“The Protocol” announcement does provide what Bishop Lowry termed in his comments following the release of the proposal “…a time for thoughtful, prayer-bathed conversations that span the theological divide.” It provides an opportunity for individuals and faith communities to be in prayer for the General Conference and particularly our Central Texas delegation that, as they receive and discern this information, they do so wisely and with a sense of spiritual peace in their hearts. More than anything else, this is a time to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and to remember to Breathe Deep, for Jesus is truly Lord and this is His church, not ours.

Did anyone from our church/conference sign “The Protocol agreement?”
No one from or representing the Central Texas Conference was an active contributor to this proposal, nor did anyone from the CTC sign “The Protocol agreement.” You can see a list of who signed the agreement and how they are affiliated with the United Methodist Church at the end of the news article posted at ctcumc.org/TheProtocol_Agreement. This information is also available on the United Methodist Council of Bishop’s website.

Where can I learn more about “The Protocol agreement?”
Details on the agreement and links to learn more can be found on the Central Texas Conference website at ctcumc.org/TheProtocol_Agreement. Other places to learn more include the United Methodist Council of Bishop’s website and ResourceUMC.

Since the deadline to submit legislation to GC20 has past (Sept. 18, 2019), will the proposed “Protocol agreement” be voted on at General Conference 2020?
There is no way to be certain if “The Protocol agreement” will be considered by the 2020 General Conference. While it is widely expected that the proper steps will be successfully completed and GC20 will have the opportunity to consider the proposal, the General Conference will determine if and/or how it will be considered.

The terms of “The Protocol” will first have to be converted into an official legislative petition and submitted to the Commission on the General Conference. According to the websites of some of the UMC Advocacy groups who signed the proposal, “The Protocol” petitions will have to come from one or more annual conferences since the Sept. 18, 2019 submission deadline has passed. Most likely, this will have to be done via a called special session of an Annual Conference. Annual Conferences may convene special sessions to approve petitions for General Conference consideration as long as the approved petitions are received by the Commission on the General Conference 45 days prior to the convening of the conference, which would be March 22, 2020.

Are there other plans/proposals for reorganizing or splitting the UMC that General Conference will consider?
Yes. You can find information, as well as a downloadable comparison of all the major proposals at https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/gc2020-proposed-plans.

When and where is the next General Conference?
The next General Conference meets May 5-15 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. You can keep up to date on all things GC20, including info about and from our Central Texas Conference Delegation at
ctcumc.org/General-Conference-2020, the CTC GC20 Facebook Page (facebook.com/ctxcgc) and the official UMC General Conference website https://gc2020welcome.org/.