

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHY ARE CONGREGATIONS CONSIDERING DISAFFILIATION FROM THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH (UMC)?

A denomination is a religious organization that believes the same theology and adheres to the same doctrine. For the United Methodist Church, our denomination is defined and described in the Book of Discipline. The covenant found in the pages and paragraphs of the Book of Discipline sets the boundaries of our theology and beliefs. The Book of Discipline has guided our life together and has united us in making disciples.

Unfortunately, some clergy, bishops, and denominational leaders disagree with some of the theology and doctrine in our Book of Discipline, and they have acted openly and (at times) in direct opposition to portions of our Discipline. In many cases, while there are processes for accountability in the Book of Discipline, the clergy, bishops, and denominational leaders have not been held accountable for breaching the covenant. Also, in many cases, where the bishop of a particular conference disagrees with some of the theology and doctrine found in the Book of Discipline – rather than enforcing the Discipline as they vowed to God to do – they have chosen not to hold clergy/churches accountable. This has caused the denomination to be ungovernable as our theology and doctrine may vary from place to place. (We have been fortunate that the current Bishop of the North Alabama Conference has always taken seriously her vow to enforce the Discipline of the church; however, it is possible that we will receive a new bishop on January 1, 2023.)

Also, the UMC is facing a numerical and financial crisis that will affect and possibly hinder the future ministry of the church. The UMC continues in a downward decline in membership in the United States. Two years after its formation in 1968, the UMC had 10.7 million U.S. members. It now has 6.3 million, an average loss of about 90,000 annually. These declines also impact the financial stability of the UMC, and this instability will be exacerbated with more traditional churches exiting the UMC. There are estimates that the denominational budget may diminish by as much as 40%+ over the next two years. With a much smaller denominational budget, the UMC will see overhead costs along with the cost of bishops and denominational staff comprise a higher percentage of the budget, significantly reducing the amount which supports missions and ministries. In spite of this projected downturn, no plans for restructuring have been announced by the UMC.

We also face the concern that the North Alabama Conference pipeline of future pastors with the ability to lead a large church such as ours is diminishing. Having a shortfall of strong leadership within the Conference could put our own pastoral leadership stability at risk.

Additionally, the UMC has been in a long-standing debate over the role of scripture in determining beliefs. Lately, certain issues related to human sexuality have received the most

attention. The Book of Discipline does not allow for same sex marriages to be conducted in the church nor ordination of clergy who are “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” This was most recently re-affirmed in the 2019 General Conference of the UMC. While the conflict involving human sexuality normally dominates any public discussion of the challenges currently facing the UMC, the conflict is but a symptom of what is really at issue: as mentioned above, disregard for the Book of Discipline by many bishops and others in leadership positions and a lack of accountability for those who choose to preach and practice the “United Methodist” faith in a manner inconsistent with UMC theology, inconsistent with The Bible and with disregard to The Book of Discipline. Unfortunately, there are some bishops in the UMC that have openly denounced the church law in violation of The Discipline in these areas.

At the 2019 Called Session of the General Conference, a paragraph was added to the Discipline which allows churches to disaffiliate; however, that paragraph will become void on December 31, 2023. Many churches have entered the discernment process to allow a decision related to disaffiliation prior to that deadline.

WHY CAN'T THE UMC RESOLVE THESE CONFLICTS AND REMAIN CONNECTED?

- It has tried but failed.
- In 2019, a special General Conference of the UMC was called to address the human sexuality issues, and the UMC voted once again to affirm the existing doctrine not allowing same sex marriages or ordination of clergy who are “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”
- A group of progressive, moderate, and traditional UMC leaders worked together to propose a compromise titled the “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation” (the Protocol) which would have provided for an amicable separation of the UMC into two churches of the UMC with no financial penalty – one traditional and one more progressive. However, Covid caused the cancelation of the 2020 Annual Conference and again in 2021. Then, in the spring of 2022, the UMC again postponed the Annual Conference (scheduled for the fall of 2022) for fear of Covid and issues related to obtaining visas for international travel. However, many of the representatives in foreign continents (namely in Africa) pleaded for the UMC to have the fall meeting and explained that they had or could have obtained travel visas. So, it is unclear when the UMC will have its next General Conference.
- At the current rate of membership in the US and the current growth of membership in Africa, Europe, and Asia – by 2024 the delegates from overseas will potentially outnumber the U.S. delegates. What this will mean for future General Conference decisions is unknown.
- Upset with the continued postponements, a large faction of traditional leaders in the UMC announced the formation of the Global Methodist Church (GMC) on May 1, 2022.

- The Protocol has been deemed “dead” by most factions of leadership in the UMC. Several of its creators have since endorsed other possible legislation to be considered at the 2024 General Conference.

HOW WILL OUR CHURCH DECIDE TO STAY IN THE UMC OR TO DISAFFILIATE?

The Bishop of the North Alabama Conference has established the process we are required to follow. That process includes the formation of a Discernment Team, making a recommendation to the Church Council, and ultimately a vote by the congregation. To aid in that process, our bishop also provided a framework, referred to as *The Bishop Wallace-Padgett Principles for Discernment*, which the Discernment Team has adopted. This process is not optional, nor was it developed by the Discernment Team or our clergy.

We have a lay-led Discernment Team that has been working on this question. The team has developed a timeline for churchwide information sessions in late August/September to be followed by Listening sessions in late September. After these sessions, the team will work to formulate a recommendation to disaffiliate or not and present that recommendation to the Church Council.

If disaffiliation is recommended and adopted by the Church Council, a church conference will take place. At the church conference, every member present will be allowed to vote. A 2/3 majority vote is required to disaffiliate. After the church-wide vote, action of the Annual Conference is required to finalize disaffiliation. Our bishop has called an Annual Conference on December 10 to consider disaffiliation requests of churches in the North Alabama Conference.

WHAT ARE OUR OPTIONS?

- Remain with the United Methodist Church
- Join the new Global Methodist Church
- Join another Methodist denomination such as the Free Methodists
- Become an independent Methodist church with the possibility of joining a network of other large former UMC churches that is under development, or later deciding to join another Methodist denomination.

WILL WE STILL BE A METHODIST CHURCH IF WE DISAFFILIATE FROM THE UMC?

Yes. All of the options that are being considered would keep us under the current Methodist theology and doctrine.

HOW WILL WE DETERMINE WHICH IS THE BEST OPTION?

The Discernment Team has conducted calls or meetings with representatives of all options listed and will make a recommendation to the Church Council later in the fall. Ultimately, if the recommendation is to disaffiliate, and the Church Council votes to adopt that recommendation, a church vote (referred to as a “church conference”) will be conducted a minimum of 10 days

later, and a 2/3 majority of those present and voting is required to pass the disaffiliation vote. This process is required by the bishop and our conference.

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR PROPERTY IF WE DISAFFILIATE?

Because of the UMC Trust Clause, our property is currently owned by the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. The UMC has developed a formula such that a disaffiliating church must pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation and an additional 12 months of apportionments, as well as its share of the conference's unfunded pension liability. In that event, the property of the church is transferred to the local church. This is possible through Paragraph 2553 of the Discipline which expires in December 2023, making this process unavailable after that time. Also, some Annual Conferences in the U.S. – but importantly NOT the North Alabama Conference – have instituted additional financial penalties for churches to be able to disaffiliate. As of June 7, 2022, if we were to disaffiliate, the estimated amount we would have to pay to secure our property was \$1.2-\$1.5 million. However, due to rising interest rates, as of July 1 that amount has decreased to \$1-\$1.2 million. This information is subject to change due to the impact of interest rates and market values of pension assets. Our annual apportionments are about \$277,000, which could be used to fund the exit fee over a period of a few years. We have no debt and are in strong financial shape.

WILL THE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE CHANGE?

Disaffiliation will not result in leadership changes. Our entire staff will remain in place, as will our lay-led governance committees. Nothing will change about how our church is led and governed. Our church will continue to be organized as described in the 2016 Book of Discipline.

HOW IS THE SENIOR PASTOR INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS?

All 12 members of the Discernment Team are in the laity. Bill Brunson and Kipp McClurg are called upon to provide theological perspective, history and context to the ongoing issues.

IF WE DISAFFILIATE, HOW WILL OUR WORSHIP, MISSIONS AND PROGRAMS CHANGE?

They will not change. We will continue to be true to our mission to share Christ by learning, telling and living His story. Our church will continue to exist in order to provide a community where everyone can experience a Christ-centered life of purpose. Our main focus will continue to be serving our community and helping people grow in their faith by spreading God's love. We expect to continue our worship services, outreach ministries, small groups, etc. as we operate them today under the doctrine of the existing UMC Book of Discipline.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ISSUES WITHIN THE UMC?

We have established a library of research materials located at <https://vhumc.org/app/uploads/2022/08/Resource-Library.pdf>. This material covers many issues and perspectives concerning the UMC. This library of resources contains all of the articles and videos studied by the Discernment Team.

DURING THIS TIME, WHAT CAN I DO?

Please pray for our church, our Discernment Team, our staff and others in the UMC. Please join our Discernment Prayer Team by committing to

- Pray daily for VHUMC to know and follow Jesus' will for His church;
- Participate in prayer gatherings, if available.

For more information contact Jill Kimbrough (jillkimbrough@bellsouth.net)

We will also be offering a time to fast, along with praying, during this time.

IS THERE A WAY I CAN SHARE MY THOUGHTS AND OPINIONS ON THE ISSUE WITH THE DISCERNMENT TEAM?

YES. The Team welcomes and encourages all comments through our email at Discernment@vhumc.org and/or at our scheduled Listening Sessions.

The following questions were answered by Rick Owen, our District Superintendent

Must the Discernment Team be unanimous in its recommendation to the Church Council, or is it a majority vote? What is the recommended wording if it is not a unanimous vote? (i.e., the discernment team by a 9 to 3 vote recommends.... OR the discernment team by majority vote recommends....?) As of this time, we have not taken a vote or even discussed it, only examples.

Answer: The discernment team recommendation can be a simple majority and can be reported simply that way to the council.

Does the Church Council vote anonymously by paper ballot or is it a vocal vote or show of hands?

Answer: The Council can use any method, but I would suggest a paper ballot allowing folks to vote without being challenged by either a voice or show of hands vote. This vote is a simple majority as well.

Are the Discernment Team members who are also members of the Church Council allowed to vote when the recommendation is made to the Church Council?

Answer: Of course. That would be appropriate.

Is the Church Council a simple majority vote?

Answer: Yes a simple majority.

If there is a recommendation to disaffiliate, it is approved by the church council, and comes before the church congregation, what is the procedure for voting? Do you have recommendations for that? Do members vote electronically on their phones (after their church membership is affirmed), or is it a paper ballot?

Answer: If the vote is to move toward disaffiliation I am contacted to schedule a church conference. We will vote by paper ballot. We ask that the church roll be sent to our office and we will produce the ballots and enclose them in an envelope with their name on a label. They will be asked to remove the ballot and mark it and place the ballot only in whatever box or basket you provide. We ask that the church provide tellers to collect the ballots. I will have a team to work with your tellers to count the votes in the room where we are assembled and we will report the results. A 2/3 vote of members present is required to disaffiliate. If the vote is to disaffiliate I will ask those who may have voted not to do so and wish to remain United Methodist to simply give their empty envelope to my team as they leave and we will work with them to find a church home.