

Denomination Discernment F.A.Q.

Compiled and edited by Rev. Jim Morrow and the Discernment Team

This document seeks to answer frequently asked questions. It is intended to help church members find essential information about the state of the United Methodist Church and our church's response. More information can be found on our South Georgia Conference website, www.sgaumc.org.

How are we related to the United Methodist Church?

Our church is part of a worldwide denomination, the United Methodist Church. The UMC is in ministry in over 130 countries, with over 12 million members and nearly 44,000 local churches. We are a connectional church, sharing in ministry with United Methodists worldwide. This allows us to combine our efforts to make disciples of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the breadth of the UMC means disagreements arise over faith and practice.

Our church was founded in 1841 and has been a part of three different denominations and multiple annual conferences (mainly due to the defaults of mergers and geographical changes). We were founded as First Methodist Church as a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church. We became a part of The Methodist Church due to the mergers of 1939 and a part of the United Methodist Church due to the mergers of 1968.

What is the nature of the issues in the United Methodist Church?

While our local church and the South Georgia Conference remain strong, the wider denomination is increasingly divided over matters of faith and practice.

Like most conflicts, it depends on a person's vantage point. Here are three basic answers:

- **Human Sexuality.** There has been a growing movement to change the denomination's traditional teaching on human sexuality, specifically regarding marriage and ordination. Our current Book of Discipline recognizes that "all people are of sacred worth" and "shall be eligible to attend worship services...and be admitted as members." Additionally, clergy may not officiate same-sex weddings, nor can they be celebrated in our churches. Practicing homosexual persons may not be ordained or appointed as bishops. The teaching of the United Methodist Church has not changed. However, there has been increasing pressure to change our Book of Discipline, which lays out our denomination's standards of faith and practice. This conversation has been ongoing since 1972, and, as recently as 2019, changes were voted down in favor of maintaining traditional doctrine and practice.
- **Governance, compliance, and accountability issues.** While the Book of Discipline has not now or ever changed on human sexuality, recently, some UMC pastors and bishops have stated their intent to break the rules anyway. The denomination's structure has not proven able to hold

people accountable to our Book of Discipline consistently. Similarly, the General Conference, the decision-making body of the denomination, has not met since the special session in 2019.

- Theology. Many within the denomination assert that the divide over human sexuality is a part of a more significant theological divide.

Is the UMC changing its doctrine and abandoning foundational beliefs of the Christian faith?

No. The Doctrinal Standards (things like the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, the content of the historic creeds, etc.) cannot change due to the “Restrictive Rules” found in Section III, ¶17 of the Book of Discipline. Our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith clearly state our belief in the Triune God, the resurrection, and other basic tenets of the Christian faith. Concerns about doctrinal divisions stem from contrarian teachings of some bishops, pastors, and institutions, not actual changes to official beliefs. Similarly, some are concerned about a lack of accountability in other annual conferences throughout the United States. It is worth noting that matters of human sexuality are not referenced in our Doctrinal Standards but in areas of the Book of Discipline that concern practice, social witness, and ministry. These areas may change. That cannot occur except by General Conference action. In short, doctrine cannot change, but teachings about sexuality may be changed. Albany First UMC and the South Georgia Annual Conference whole-heartedly affirm the Doctrinal Standards, historic creeds, and the Book of Discipline.

How is our church responding to the issues in the denomination?

Our church leadership has paid active attention to developments for many years. Beginning in Fall 2021, our church council began receiving regular updates. Throughout the Spring and Summer of 2022, our clergy led information sessions for church leaders, Sunday School classes, and small groups. Following the 2022 South Georgia Annual Conference, after various judicial council decisions (including the prohibition against Annual Conferences disaffiliating as a group), our church council sought to offer leadership to our church by authorizing a discernment team. Our Committee on Nominations and Leadership Development nominated this team, which our Church Council approved in early August. The members of the team are:

- Kathy Wooten, Chair
- Maelu Culpepper
- Stan Curington
- Sonny Deriso
- Laura Fay
- Jimmy Harris
- Chad Mullins
- Beth O’Brien
- Karen Wakeford
- Kaye Walden
- Hank Wright
- Tim Yates
- Rev. Jim Morrow

The committee’s role is 1) researching all aspects of affiliation and disaffiliation with the United Methodist Church, 2) communicating openly with our congregation, & 3) resourcing our Church Council. The discernment committee will be a non-decision-making team under the leadership of the Church Council.

The committee immediately began meeting to prepare information and make plans to carry out its work. We commissioned the team for this work during a special prayer service on September 4th, and our pastor called us to a season of prayer and fasting.

The discernment committee will hold a congregation-wide information meeting on Wednesday, October 19th, at 6 pm. At that time, a congregational survey will begin to provide information about the needs and desires of our church members. Additional information and discussion opportunities will likely be planned.

What is “discernment,” and how can we participate in it together?

Discernment is a way of hearing the voice and will of God when faced with questions and uncertainty. It’s more than simple decision-making, weighing the pros and cons, or politicking. Instead, discernment recognizes 1) that God is good, 2) God desires the best for His people and His church, and 3) that God is pleased to make His will known to those who seek him.

Discernment involves learning, conversation, and intentional prayer. Our Discernment Team is helping us with that. Every member of our church will have access to accurate, pertinent information. Similarly, church members will have the opportunity to talk with the team and other members. Church members will also have a chance to share their thoughts with the church through conversation and a forthcoming congregational survey.

The final and most important part of discernment is intentional prayer. Beginning on September 4th, our pastor has called us into a season of prayer and fasting. Each day at noon, you are invited to pause for prayer on behalf of our church. Additionally, each Thursday, you are encouraged to practice fasting. The church office has more information about fasting and how to practice it.

You can learn more about discernment in the book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* by Ruth Haley Barton (chapter 12, “Finding God’s Will Together”).