

Denomination Discernment F.A.Q.

October 19, 2022

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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 and is an extension of the FAQ document that was released previously. 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 wholeheartedly affirm the Doctrinal Standards, historic creeds, and the Book of Discipline.

So, there is division in the UMC. How is the UMC managing this?

Currently, the UMC is in a waiting period. The General Conference is the only body that can set policy for the denomination. It typically meets every four years unless there is a called session. The called session in 2019 was held to find a resolution to ongoing conflicts over sexuality. At this conference, many proposals were presented, and the traditional plan was passed (a plan that retained current teaching and sought to enhance accountability). Afterward, a diverse group of leaders proposed a plan for graceful separation to be presented at the next regularly scheduled General Conference, to be held in 2020. However, this conference was postponed due to COVID-19. It has been delayed twice more and will now occur in 2024 (dates to be announced). In the meantime, other agencies, churches, pastors, and laity are attempting to navigate this interim period faithfully.

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.

Is our church considering changing its theology or practice?

No. Our church is not deciding to change theology and practice. Our church is discerning its relationship with the United Methodist Church denomination. That involves prayerful learning and conversation about the state of the UMC, potential future changes in the UMC, and our desires for our future. While our church is not considering changes to our theology and practice, our decisions may eventually affect our theology and practice. These potential changes are not entirely clear, though trajectories may offer possible indicators.

What is disaffiliation?

The 2019 General Conference approved a disaffiliation policy (§2553) that allows congregations to leave the UMC and have full rights to its property. Based on this policy, the South Georgia Annual Conference developed its own policy, clarifying and outlining the criteria and process used for our conference. The South Georgia Annual Conference has one of the most gracious and straightforward policies in the United States, allowing churches to disaffiliate by fulfilling two financial obligations: 1) paying the congregation's portion of the unfunded clergy pension liability and 2) payment of any unpaid apportioned funds for the previous 12 months as well as an additional 12 months. You can find more information (and the text of the South Georgia Disaffiliation Policy) here: <https://www.sgaumc.org/disaffiliation>.

What is the process for a church disaffiliating from the UMC?

You can find the steps for disaffiliation here: <https://www.sgaumc.org/disaffiliation>. After a time of discernment and completing a few steps, a congregation's church council may agree that a local church wishes to consider disaffiliation and notify the District Superintendent, who will then call a church conference. A church conference consists of all professing members of a local church. A two-thirds (2/3) majority of members present at the conference must approve the decision to disaffiliate. The South Georgia Annual Conference must ratify the request to disaffiliate. To utilize the disaffiliation process, the results of a congregational vote must be submitted to the Annual Conference by April 1, 2023.

Is it true that this is the last chance for a church to leave the UMC and keep its property?

No, not in the South Georgia Conference. You may have seen videos or articles that report that "this is your last chance to leave the United Methodist Church." While that may hold true for many annual conferences, it is not true for South Georgia.

It is correct that ¶2553, the disaffiliation policy, will "sunset" or expire at the end of 2023. (Why? Because no one envisioned that General Conference wouldn't be held in 2020). However, the South Georgia Conference Board of Trustees has agreed to allow churches to "depart" the denomination through the end of 2024 under the same terms as ¶2553. They can do this because they are responsible for the ownership and disposition of church property. Additionally, Bishop David Graves has declared his intention to call a special session of our South Georgia Annual Conference in late 2024 to allow churches to observe the General Conference's actions before deciding.

What is the difference between "disaffiliating" and "departing" the UMC?

Disaffiliating is the term used to leave the denomination under ¶2553, specifically for reasons of conscience about the church's handling of sexuality. This process will expire on 12/31/23. Learn more about disaffiliation here: <https://www.sgaumc.org/disaffiliation>

Departing is the process for leaving the denomination after 2023, utilizing the agreed-upon process by our Conference Board of Trustees. This process, using ¶2549, will allow a church to officially close, take ownership of its property, then reopen as a member of a different denomination or an independent church. Learn more about departing here: <https://www.sgaumc.org/disaffiliations-after-2023>

What are the decisions that our church may make?

Our church is prayerfully discerning how we will respond. This involves ensuring that we are listening for the voice of God, getting accurate information, ensuring that we are not driven by emotion or emotional arguments, and engaging in dialogue with one another.

- Remain in the United Methodist Church. While the trajectory of the UMC may change, it is not evident that there will be no space for traditional churches. The church may also decide that it can affirm the actual outcomes of General Conference 2024.

- Disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church in 2023. The church may wish to seek disaffiliation immediately.
- Depart the United Methodist Church in 2024. The church may wish to take advantage of the South Georgia Board of Trustees departing process, allowing for more information about the outcomes of General Conference 2024 and the official form of the Global Methodist Church.
- Pending the outcomes of General Conference 2024, remain in the UMC after 2024 with the opportunity to depart if things change.
- If the church chooses to disaffiliate or depart, one of the following decisions may be made:
 - Join another Wesleyan/Methodist denomination.
 - Become an independent church.

What happens to the appointed pastor(s) if a church disaffiliates?

The discernment and decisions of pastors and churches are separate. Churches decide their own path and relationship with the denomination. Pastors decide theirs. If a church disaffiliates or departs and the pastor does not want to do the same, they will receive a new appointment in the United Methodist Church. If the church and the pastor both want to disaffiliate or depart and agree that they would like to continue ministry together, there are options for that. If the church remains affiliated with the UMC and the pastor wishes not to be, they will part ways, and the church will receive a new United Methodist pastor.

How would staying UMC, going independent, or switching to the GMC impact our church?

Most people will not recognize the difference in daily operations and weekly worship services. However, some changes will occur. If a church decides to be independent, it will have to determine its own doctrine and practices, select its own clergy, and receive no accountability or support from a wider connection.

Will we receive a new bishop next year?

The Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference will meet on November 2-4, 2022, at Lake Junaluska, NC. That conference will elect and appoint bishops for our area. Bishop David Graves, our current bishop, has expressed his desire and expectation to be reappointed to South Georgia, though we have to wait and see what the outcome will be. You can learn more about the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference at www.sejumc.org.

What will happen at the 2024 General Conference?

Simply put, no one knows. The date has not been set yet (though we expect it to be in the Spring of 2024). Therefore, no one has been able to submit proposed changes. At this point, the Protocol for Grace and Reconciliation through Separation (which would allow for an amicable and orderly creation of multiple new Methodist denominations) is properly before the General Conference. (Some people responsible for developing the Protocol have withdrawn support, but many still support it, and it is properly before the General Conference). We will know more

when opportunities to submit legislation become available, though, even then, we will not know what the GC will do until it does it.

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”).