

Charting the Course of Our Church

A REPORT OF THE DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE



FIRST UNITED
METHODIST CHURCH ALBANY

January 31, 2023

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Introduction: A Word from Our Discernment Team Chair

We are approaching a crossroad where we, as a local congregation of the United Methodist Church, will decide if our church will remain affiliated as a United Methodist congregation or will disaffiliate from the UMC. Many of you have been Methodists since birth and remember when The Methodist Church combined with other connections to become the United Methodist Church in 1968. Since then, others have joined our local church, some more recently. We on the Discernment Team have heard your voices. Some of you are certain that we should leave the UMC and seek other connectional leadership; others are unwilling to disaffiliate from the UMC connection; and some are undecided. Whatever your connection to our church, whatever your stance on the issue of disaffiliation, we all love our Albany First Church, and we don't want to leave the congregation we treasure.

There are many reasons why we chose to become members of Albany First. New members frequently tell us that our congregation is welcoming to visitors, making this a place of hospitality, acceptance, and grace, open to all who choose to enter and worship. Our church enables us to live as faithful, growing disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are a people of service, choosing to be the hands and feet of Jesus to others as Christ would have us to be. Our church allows many opportunities for education and fellowship within Christian community, with possibilities for growth to strengthen our Christian walk. These opportunities are available across all age groups, from children to senior citizens.

No matter what attracted us to become a part of our church or what keeps us connected, we want all to continue to be a part of our church family.

Whatever the future of our denominational connection, we expect to respond to God's unconditional love for us by demonstrating that all people are God's children. We want our church family to be connected to God and to one another.

Decisions will be made in the weeks ahead. No matter the outcomes of those decisions, you are a valued member of God's Church. We pray that our family of faith may continue to love one another just as God loves us.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 22:38-40

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Romans 15:7

Kathy Wooten

Discernment Team Chair

A Word from Our Church Council Chair

For over a year, our Church Council has received discernment information both individually and as a body of church leaders. We have heard from our clergy and Discernment Team, we have prayed for God's guidance for our church, and we have shared our thoughts with each other on whether or not our church members should have the opportunity to decide if our church remains affiliated with the United Methodist Church or becomes disaffiliated from the UMC denomination.

We realize that just as individual members of our church have differing opinions and positions on this issue, so do members of our Church Council. Therefore, after prayerful consideration, the Church Council has taken the position that such an important decision should be determined by a formal congregational vote. The Council will act on the two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of members present at a Church Conference called for that purpose. Any subsequent decisions would be by a separate vote later, upon recommendation of the Church Council.

Allen Twiggs

Church Council Chair

A Word from Our Senior Pastor

Since the founding of this city, God had a vision that there should be Methodist Christians at the heart of it. For generations, our foremothers and forefathers have offered Christ to the people of Albany, GA. We are who we are today because they were faithful in their time. They listened to God's voice and followed the leadership of the Holy Spirit, giving us a great legacy of deep faith in Jesus Christ and life-giving ministry to our community.

Even in the most trying of times, they not only endured but allowed God to work mightily through them. For example, in times of war, they led revival in the city and sacrificed to care for soldiers' families, despite high personal risk. From our beginning in 1841, our church has been "For the City." Each subsequent generation has taken up this mantle and faithfully stewarded it. This is our DNA, handed down to us by the faithful before us. We're taking up the mantle of ministry in this era and answering the call to offer Christ to the city. Because God loves this city. And so do we.

We did not desire, nor did we seek, this watershed moment of discernment. Yet, like the many unexpected challenges our church has faced over the 181 years, this moment has come under our stewardship. How can we be faithful in this moment? Lean into God and whom God has made us to be.

We are built upon the spiritual strength of those who came before us. They faced significant challenges and kept their focus on offering Christ to this city. In the grand tradition of overwhelming Methodist optimism, we, like generations past, look forward to a future with power and hope. We, too, know that God is at work amid all things, doing a greater work than we could ever imagine. So, we keep our focus on Jesus Christ, and we seek God in discernment.

In the coming days, lean into these things, finding strength and direction from God. Trust that God is speaking and fervently pray for God's guidance. Enter into prayer and holy conversation with one another. Hold space for people to express their hearts so that we may listen together and have the confidence that we love one another in the Lord, no matter our positions. Be wise, mature, and faithful. And dedicate yourselves to learning about the matters before us. This guide is an excellent resource. Please attend our information and conversation sessions. Ask questions of the Discernment Team, Church Council, and your pastoral staff.

I want to express my undying gratitude to our Discernment Team, who continue to work tirelessly to guide us, our Church Council, who continue to lead us with excellence, and you, the people of First United Methodist Church. Your gentleness, love, and maturity through this journey have been exemplary. If I must help steward this moment, I can think of no better people to steward it with than the faithful, outstanding people of First United Methodist Church of Albany. Know that the rest of your church and I are constantly praying for you.

I am foolhardy enough to believe that the Holy Spirit will speak through you. So, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, seek God. For God is at work, and He will speak.

Rev. James R. Morrow

Senior Pastor

Communications Schedule

February 5 at 9:30 – 10:20 AM

Members are invited to an informal meeting in Sapp Conference Room to ask questions and share comments.

February 16 at 6:00 PM

Church Council meeting with District Superintendent Reverend Doreen Smalls.

Members, other than those serving on the Church Council, are invited to observe.

Yet To Be Scheduled

1. Other informational meetings
2. Church Conference for congregational vote on issue of disaffiliation

Exploring the Issues Part 1: Homosexual Marriage and Ordination

The subject of homosexual marriage and the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals is complex and worthy of biblical and theological reflection.

Understanding the arguments on both sides of the subject is beneficial for everyone, regardless of their position.

To help acquaint our church with the nuances of the arguments, we direct you to Dr. Pace & Dr. Temple's Conversation, a pastoral conversation in the form of letters written by Dr. Tom Pace III and Dr. Chappell Temple, Ph.D., both United Methodist clergy at the time. Dr. Pace writes in support of the church's embrace of same-sex practice, while Dr. Temple writes in favor of retaining the church's current position. In our estimation, this document addresses the major arguments on the topic. We urge you to read the document in its entirety here: [A Pastoral Conversation Regarding Homosexuality Same Sex Marriage and the Church \(https://firstmethodistalbany.com/a-pastoral-conversation-application/\)](https://firstmethodistalbany.com/a-pastoral-conversation-application/)

What follows is an executive summary of each writer's position and arguments

Executive Summary: Dr. Tom Pace III

The conversation begins with an in-depth response by Dr. Tom Pace III, who has come to believe that the practice of homosexuality is not contrary to Christian teaching. He writes, "...it is exactly because I believe in the Bible and take it very seriously as the way I know who Jesus is and how we are to live as his followers, and because I believe it is the living Word of God, that I think it is time for the United Methodist church [sic] to change her official position on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and ordination of gay men and women.

Dr. Pace describes a love for scripture and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (the use of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience to discern contemporary, pastoral issues in the faith). In interpreting scripture, he recognizes that the Word of God and the human beings that recorded scripture did so in a particular, distant culture.

Therefore, he seeks the Holy Spirit's guidance in applying it today using the question, "...what actions, attitudes, and behaviors do we practice that distract from our purpose or serve as an obstacle to others coming to a relationship with a living Savior?" ⁽⁵⁾

Dr. Pace describes four reasons that he believes the UMC must change its official position on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and ordination.

1. **"Because we now understand that homosexuality is not a choice people make."** Dr. Pace notes that "While there is no universally agreed upon cause of homosexuality, the scientific community has come to understand that there is a biological component in some way." ⁽⁸⁾ He similarly notes that "this does not mean that gay people have no choice in the behavior they choose," and that they could choose celibacy ⁽⁸⁾. However, he notes that "this is something that should be chosen in response to a call from God, rather than imposed by the church ⁽⁸⁾."
2. **"Because the homosexual practices referred to in Scripture are not the same as monogamous committed relationships within the bond of marriage."** Dr. Pace makes the argument that various pertinent passages of scripture refer not to the acts involved in committed same-sex relationships but to either historically specific situations or to abusive behavior. In a discussion of other

pertinent passages, such as Romans 1, he notes that “it is hard for me to reconcile that kind of language with the gay men and women I know who are in monogamous relationships, committed to Christ, and deeply seeking to follow God’s will” ⁽¹⁰⁾.

3. **“Because creating a second class of members in the body of Christ based on their sexual identity harms people with our rejection, placing an obstacle in the way of their relationship with Jesus. Our greatest responsibility is to draw all people into a relationship with Jesus.”** Dr. Pace discusses his experience with gay people feeling hurt by the church’s position on this issue. He recalls John Wesley and the first General Rule, “Do no harm.” He notes that “Jesus practiced a radical inclusion because he wanted to draw all people into relationship with him....We should do the same” ⁽¹³⁾.
4. **“The essence of Christian marriage is mutual submission, faithful love, and holiness, rather than complementary genders or gender roles.”** Dr. Pace identifies these characteristics as the essentials of Christian marriage. In wrestling with texts such as Genesis 1 and Jesus’ quotation of that passage in Mark 10, Dr. Pace rejects the notion that being male and female are prerequisites for marriage. Instead, he notes that United Methodists are not complementarian, meaning that they do not codify in doctrine the concept that there is an inherent hierarchy and gender roles. In so doing, he dismisses the idea that biblical passages such as the ones referenced should be exclusive to males and females, both in creation and in marriage. Instead, he focuses on two people who have mutual submission, faithful love, and holiness becoming one despite their biological sex.

Dr. Pace closes his argument by acknowledging that decisions about how to apply the Bible can be difficult, but “If I err, I want to err on the side of grace.” He expresses his belief as an evangelical Christian that “reaching all people with the good news of Jesus’ lavish love is the most important thing of all” (16).

Executive Summary: Chappell Temple, Ph.D

Dr. Temple describes himself as a passionate pastor who seeks to retain the current position of the United Methodist Church and traditional understandings of human sexuality.

He commences his discussion of scripture by asserting that the question of differing positions on sexuality cannot be “simplistically reduced to someone’s view of the authority of scripture, as though one side has the Bible and the other does not...but rather in exactly how we are to interpret those words” (18).

Dr. Temple acknowledges that “the question of same-sex behavior is not a prominent biblical concern, at least insofar as specific textual references are involved. He then goes on to demonstrate how equating the question of sexuality is not comparable to prior generations’ use of scripture to support slavery. To that end, he shares this quote: “Thus, even before the actual institution of slavery is abolished, the work of the gospel abolishes the assumptions and prejudices that make slavery possible” (19).

He does the same regarding the use of scripture to subjugate women and prevent them from being ordained in the church. He notes that the scriptures are rife with examples of the value of women and their ministry. He closes this section by saying, “However polemically helpful, we may suggest that the

attempt to draw a parallel to slavery and women's rights with that of condemning homosexual behavior is thus misleading" (20).

Dr. Temple goes on to discuss some of the specific texts that deal with homosexuality. In so doing, he makes the following arguments:

1. Though some suggest that the Old Testament texts (i.e.: Leviticus) regarding homosexuality condemn male prostitution and pagan cultic practices, the New Testament "reaffirms the validity of the Old Testament warnings about homosexual behavior, suggesting that the prohibitions were not simply part of the ceremonial laws which were only for a certain time and situation, but they were a part of God's everlasting moral laws with a continuing ethical significance" (21).
2. He discusses New Testament passages, such as Romans 1, noting that "it is simply untenable to buy into the idea that in the Graeco-Roman world of the first century, the only form of same-gender behavior that existed was that of pederasty, or contact between older men and younger boys, so that must be the context for Paul's words here."
3. He addresses the Greek word *malakoi* and *arsenekoi*, the terms often translated to refer to same-sex sexual activity in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy.

Dr. Temple concludes this section, saying, "All of which leads me to disagree with one of my friend's chief arguments, namely, the idea that the practices condemned in scripture are not the same as modern monogamous homosexual relationships, and thus the prohibitions against those practices are not applicable in the current situation of many" (24).

He goes on to discuss a pastoral perspective, asking, "what is an appropriate response for a compassionate pastor" regarding this topic? ⁽²⁴⁾. He makes the following claims:

1. Same-sex attraction likely does have a genetic and biological component.
2. He notes, "So even if same-sex attraction is entirely genetic and thus out of our control, it doesn't imply that we should not subsequently try to control how we act upon those desires" ⁽²⁵⁾.
3. The Bible does not condemn anyone for an orientation, only for behavior.
4. Those dealing with same-sex attraction "stand in need of the church's love and support, which ought never to be constrained by either awkwardness or misplaced political correctness" ⁽²⁵⁾.
5. Same sex attracted people who practice celibacy are not second-class citizens but amazing examples of the power of Christ to work in our lives.
6. Scripture honors both marriage and singleness.
7. Compassion is not the same as simple acceptance.
8. He notes, "Some have suggested that it is unfair for the church to have singled out homosexual behavior as sinful in God's eyes. But the reality is that it has generally not been those within the church who have focused on that behavior, but those who advocate for it and have insisted that same sex behavior is not a sin and should not be considered as such" ⁽²⁶⁾.
9. He notes that participation and membership, baptism, service, and the means of grace are open to all, but from his perspective ordination is a

different matter because no one is entitled to be a pastor by civil right, but as a gift from the church.

Dr. Temple closes his article by expressing his hope that this discussion will not dominate the church forever. He feels, however, that he must "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people," (Jude 3). He hopes that each one can find a way to be "faithful and fruitful with a passion for truth and a compassion for all" ⁽²⁸⁾.

Exploring the Issues Part 2: Governance and Practice in the United Methodist Church

As the United Methodist Church has wrestled with human sexuality, it has experienced challenges in governance and structure. Similarly, the denomination appears poised to chart a new course regarding governance, structure, and practice.

These matters are worthy of reflection for everyone, regardless of their position. While there are many possible ways to examine these matters, we find it most fruitful to illustrate them with concrete examples from the most recent Jurisdictional Conferences, including the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference (SEJ) to which our church belongs.

What follows is a summary of the outcomes of the SEJ Conference, along with potential points of agreement and disagreement. You can find more information about the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference at www.sejumc.org.

1. United States Jurisdictional Conferences were held on November 2-4, 2022.

Jurisdictional Conferences are usually scheduled to occur in tandem with General Conferences. The primary work of the Jurisdictional Conferences is to elect bishops to serve the Annual Conferences of the respective jurisdictions. Because General Conference was not held as intended in 2020 and was subsequently postponed, Jurisdictional Conferences had yet to be held as per custom. In response to a request by the Council of Bishops, the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church made provisions for Jurisdictional Conferences to be held on these dates “for the election and assignment of new bishops for the limited

purpose of effectuating the continuance of an episcopacy in The United Methodist Church under ¶¶ 26, 27.2, and 45 of the Constitution”.¹

There are five jurisdictions in the United States. Our church is a part of the Southeastern Jurisdiction.²

2. The delegates of each Jurisdictional Conference were elected in 2019. These delegates will also serve at the 2024 General Conference.

Delegates were elected from each Annual Conference in 2019 to serve at the 2020 General Conference and subsequent Jurisdictional Conference. The delegates elected at the 2019 Annual Conferences served at the Jurisdictional Conference. Delegates are elected once per quadrennium. Therefore, no new delegates could be elected despite the postponement of General and Jurisdictional Conferences and vacancies in delegations across the USA.

Judicial Council Decision 1451 asserted that these same delegations will serve at the 2024 General Conference.³ Elections to replace delegates or fill vacancies cannot be held.

This has a few effects. First, it can be expected that the 2024 General Conference will have the tone and tenor of the recent Jurisdictional Conferences. Second, some Annual Conferences will be underrepresented due to delegations that have been diminished by deaths, disaffiliations, or other reasons. You can find information about the South Georgia delegation at <https://www.sgaumc.org/2020-delegation> (this list will be updated after the 2023 Annual Conference). Third, this

¹ Decision Number 1445. <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/decision-1445>

² Jurisdictions Directory. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/jurisdictions-directory>

³ Decision Number 1451. <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/judicial-council-decision-1451>

decision means that the number of delegates per annual conference (worldwide) will not be recalculated to reflect current membership information, which may cause concern for those who wish to retain the current Book of Discipline position.

This is a welcome situation for those who appreciate the outcomes of the Jurisdictional Conferences and would like to see the General Conference reach similar outcomes. Others will be concerned that the influence of other annual conferences across the globe will be diminished at the 2024 General Conference. Similarly, this is a cause for concern for those who did not appreciate the outcomes of the Jurisdictional Conferences.

3. Each Jurisdictional Conference elected bishops in November 2022. The start date for new episcopal (bishop) assignments was set as January 1, 2023.

Bishops were elected at each Jurisdictional Conference and began their term of service on January 1st. This allowed bishops who could not retire due to postponements to enter retirement. Similarly, it allowed for Annual Conferences to receive episcopal leadership.

In the Southeastern Jurisdiction, three new bishops were elected. With five open episcopal areas, two bishops are serving multiple Annual Conferences. Bishop David Graves is one of those bishops; he was reassigned to serve the South Georgia Annual Conference and the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference. Similarly, Bishop Deborah Wallace Padgett was assigned to serve the North Alabama and Holston Annual Conferences.

In addition, Rev. Tom Berlin was elected and assigned to serve the Florida Annual Conference. You can find more information about Bishop Berlin at <https://revtomberlin.com>. Rev. Connie Shelton was elected and assigned to the North Carolina Annual Conference. You can read more about Bishop Shelton at <https://>

tinyurl.com/connieshelton. Rev. Robin Dease was elected and assigned to the North Georgia Annual Conference (more information about Bishop Dease can be found at www.ngumc.org/bishop).

It is worth noting that this is the first time in the history of the Southeastern Jurisdiction that the elected bishops were open to or advocating for changing the Book of Discipline's language regarding human sexuality.

Bishops were elected in the other jurisdictions as well. Notably, Rev. Cedrick Bridgeforth was elected by the Western jurisdiction and assigned to the California-Pacific Annual Conference. Bishop Bridgeforth was elected even though the Book of Discipline prohibits the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexual persons, and the Judicial Council decided that the Western Jurisdiction violated the Book of Discipline the last time it elected a self-avowed, practicing homosexual person to the episcopacy.

Some will welcome these developments as they move towards changes in the denomination's practices. Others will find these developments evidence of a shift towards unwelcome change and organizational dysfunction.

4. Each Jurisdictional Conference passed three resolutions.

Three resolutions were submitted for consideration at each Jurisdictional Conference, including the SEJ. The SEJ Committee on Resolutions recommended that the body not address these resolutions as they violated either the Book of Discipline or the Standing Rules of the Conference. However, the body of the conference voted to appeal that decision and subsequently voted on and approved the resolutions. The same resolutions also passed the other US Jurisdictional Conferences.

One resolution, entitled "Leading with Integrity,"⁴ recognizes that clergy and laity may leave the denomination. It calls for those who intend to disaffiliate from the UMC to "recuse themselves from leadership roles in all areas of the church, including the local church, district, conference, jurisdictional, and general church level committees, boards, agencies, delegations, and episcopal leaders." This resolution may be construed to punish or disenfranchise those leaving the United Methodist Church. At the same time, it will allow the UMC in the SEJ to avoid conflicts of interest as it moves forward from the initial season of disaffiliation.

The resolution entitled "Queer Delegates' Call to Center Justice and Empowerment for LGBTQIA+¹ People in the UMC"⁵ calls for support for the LGBTQIA+ community and, among other things, calls for Annual Conferences, the Jurisdiction, and bishops to "not pursue or resolve in a timely fashion through a non-punitive, just resolution process any complaints against clergy [or bishop] regarding their sexual orientation or clergy who officiate weddings of LGBTQIA+ persons." The passage of the "Queer Delegates Call" marks a tonal and cultural shift in the SEJ, which may concern traditionalist United Methodists while being celebrated by those who advocate changing the Discipline.

The resolution "In Support of U.S. as Regional Conference" lends support to the United States becoming its own regional conference so that it may conduct USA-centric business apart from the General Conference. While pointing to potential legislation at GC24 and having no force on its own, this resolution concerns people with many outlooks. Some find it helpful to allow every region to prepare ministry in its own context without making US-dominated legislation the focus of

⁴<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60f7c265bd35bd0f0845e07b/t/635f31d87d58c0223f2c9ff8/1667183064048/Leading+with+Integrity.pdf>

⁵<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60f7c265bd35bd0f0845e07b/t/635f31aa7d58c0223f2c996e/1667183018779/Queer+Delegate+Jurisdictional+Conference+Legislation+-+Southeastern+Jurisdiction.pdf>

the worldwide General Conference. Others think that it reduces the voice of worldwide delegates and allows the US to evade being led by the majority voice of global United Methodism. Traditionalists note that if this kind of approach is made via General Conference legislation, changes regarding sexuality are more likely. Those who advocate change would find this a welcome shift.

Who Can Vote at the Church Conference?

On February 16, Reverend Doreen Smalls, SW GA District Superintendent, will meet with the Church Council and any church members wishing to attend to discuss the disaffiliation process and answer questions about the voting procedure. After that meeting the DS, our Senior Pastor, and several Council leaders will meet to set a date for a congregational vote. According to the UMC rules and by-laws, only full, professing members of our congregation will be allowed to vote on this matter. You must be present to vote.

The Church Conference will be facilitated by Reverend Smalls, our District Superintendent. A team of staff and volunteers from our church will be in place to check in all attendees and verify membership in Albany First UMC. Persons not on our membership roll will not be admitted into the sanctuary for the vote. Please come to the Conference with the understanding that you will probably be asked for identification to assure a proper vote. This is not meant to offend anyone, so please help the church staff and our church family conduct this process smoothly and efficiently.

More information will be sent to the congregation as soon as the voting date is set. If you have any doubts about your membership status, please contact Karyl Harris, 229-432-7407, or email at kharris@firstmethodistalbany.com. Please remember that whatever the outcome of the vote, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, working together, loving and respecting each other as we seek God's will for our congregation.

Fees Associated with Disaffiliation

The following are the projected costs for possible disaffiliation from the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church:

1. Pay apportionments from 2022 and 2023 if disaffiliating in 2023

Our church is current on our required apportionment payments from 2022. We would owe \$193,795 for our apportionments due in 2023. Apportionments are the annual budget of the South Georgia Annual Conference apportioned to local churches. If our church congregation votes to continue our affiliation with the United Methodist Church, our church would still owe the annual apportionment amount of \$193,795 for 2023.

2. Pay our assessed portion of pension liability

The estimated cost in this area is \$298,132. Pension liability is the total of projected shortfalls in investments that produce earnings to fund clergy pensions. If shortfalls occurred in the future in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC, these invested pension liability funds would assist in meeting those needs.

3. Legal costs required by the process

All costs for the transfer of title, incorporation, or other legal work would be borne by the local church. The total cost to disaffiliate is difficult to predict. An estimate of \$8000-\$10,000 is included in the total.

The total estimated cost for our church to disaffiliate is approximately \$500,000. Our church will request the updated cost of the pension liability funds on March 1, 2023, when revised figures will be made available. We will provide an update on costs at that time.

2023 Apportionments \$193,795	+	Pension Liability \$298,132	+	Legal Costs \$8,000 - \$10,000	≈	Approximate Cost \$500,000
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Number of Disaffiliated Churches by Annual Conferences

The link provided shows a chart* of the United Methodist News' count of how many US UMC church disaffiliations have been approved by Annual Conferences. The tally comes from a UM News review of U.S. Annual Conference reports, publicly available journals and reports of the 17 special Annual Conference sessions this year. The information is updated regularly.

A church does not complete the disaffiliation process until its request to disaffiliate has been approved by its Annual Conference. The South Georgia Annual Conference will hold a special called session on May 21, 2023, for the purpose of voting on appropriate requests for disaffiliation that have come before the Conference by April 1, 2023.

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/disaffiliations-approved-by-annual-conferences>

**A printed copy of this chart is included on the following two pages. Please note this chart was downloaded on January 31, so the link provided and the printed version may be different because website is updated regularly.*

Conference	2019	2020	2021	2022	Special Sessions 2022
Alabama-West Florida	0	0	8	4	35
Alaska	0	0	1	0	
Arkansas	1	4	0	0	35
Baltimore-Washington	0	0	0	2	
California-Pacific	0	0	0	0	
California-Nevada	0	0	0	0	
Central Texas	0	0	0	0	81
Dakotas	1	0	1	0	18
Desert Southwest	0	0	0	0	
East Ohio	0	1	1	11	
Eastern Pennsylvania	0	1	0	0	
Florida	0	0	3	14	
Great Plains	0	6	4	12	55
Greater New Jersey	0	0	0	0	
Holston	0	0	0	0	
Illinois Great Rivers	0	0	2	1	
Indiana	0	1	9	29	105
Iowa	0	0	0	1	
Kentucky	3	3	0	8	57
Louisiana	1	0	2	9	58
Memphis	0	2	1		
Michigan	0	3	1	4	
Minnesota	0	1	0	3	
Mississippi	7	0	23	13	
Missouri	0	0	5	11	
Mountain Sky	0	2	2	0	6
New England	0	1	3	0	
New Mexico	0	0	0	0	
New York	0	0	0	0	
North Alabama	1	0	0	0	198

Conference	2019	2020	2021	2022	Special Sessions 2022
North Carolina	0	0	0	0	249
North Georgia	0	0	0	71	
North Texas	0	0	0	0	
Northern Illinois	0	0	0	0	
Northwest Texas	0	0	0	0	145
Oklahoma	2	0	0	0	29
Oklahoma Indian Missionary	0	0	0	0	
Oregon-Idaho	0	0	0	0	
Pacific Northwest	0	0	0	0	
Peninsula-Delaware	0	0	11	5	
Red Bird Missionary Conference	0	0	0	0	
Rio Texas	0	0	0	1	
South Carolina	0	0	1	1	
South Georgia	0	7	9	18	62
Susquehanna	0	2	1	4	
Tennessee	0	7	6	0	
Tennessee-Western Kentucky	0	0	0	60	
Texas	0	0	1	0	294
Upper New York	0	0	0	8	
Virginia	0	0	1	0	10
West Ohio	0	0	0	0	80
West Virginia	0	0	0	0	
Western North Carolina	0	7	16	18	
Western Pennsylvania	0	0	1	0	
Wisconsin	0	0	1	0	
Totals for each round of sessions	16	48	114	308	1517
Cumulative totals	16	64	178	486	2003

Denomination Discernment F.A.Q.

January 24, 2023

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 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): 1) We were founded as First Methodist Church as a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 2) We became a part of The Methodist Church due to the mergers of 1939 and (3) 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 remains 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:

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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, but changes 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 in 2020. However, this conference was

postponed due to COVID-19. It has been delayed twice more and is now scheduled to occur on April 24-May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, NC. In the meantime, other agencies, churches, pastors, and laity are attempting to navigate this interim period faithfully.

Since that time the Jurisdictional Conferences in the United States have met. Each jurisdiction elected bishops who began their term of service on January 1, 2023. Bishop David Graves was reassigned to serve both the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference as well as our Annual Conference. Of note is that each jurisdiction passed resolutions pertaining to human sexuality and the Western Jurisdiction elected another married and openly homosexual bishop. More information about the Southeast Jurisdictional Conference can be found at <https://www.sejumc.org>.

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:

**In December 2022, the Church Council added two additional members to the Discernment Team:*

Kathy Wooten, Chair	Jimmy Harris	Hank Wright
Maelu Culpepper	Chad Mullins	Tim Yates
Stan Curington	Beth O'Brien	Rev. Jim Morrow
Sonny Deriso	Karen Wakeford	*Austin Turner
Laura Fay	Kaye Walden	*Allen Twiggs

Austin Turner, 2022 Church Council Chair, and Allen Twiggs, 2023 Church Council Chair.

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

The Team 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 Team held a congregation-wide informational meeting on Wednesday, October 19th, at 6 pm. Following that meeting, a congregational survey was conducted to provide information about the needs and desires of our church members. Listening sessions were scheduled on weekdays, evenings, and Sunday mornings to provide additional information and discussion opportunities. Church members were invited to register and attend these smaller group sessions with committee and council members to discuss issues and ask questions.

What decisions has our church made so far?

Our church has been 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.

On November 28, 2022, after hearing information from the Discernment Team and carefully considering options for the way forward, our Church Council voted 33-3 to ask our District Superintendent to call a Church Conference for the purpose of holding a congregational vote on the issue of disaffiliation from the United Methodist denomination. The Council made this decision for the following reasons:

1. We have concerns over the erosion of the traditional view on issues within the United Methodist denomination.
2. The results of the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference did not give an indication there will be any improvements in the dysfunction in the denomination.
3. There is a decreased chance that accountability for violations of the Book of Discipline will be addressed by General Conference 2024.
4. We believe the best path forward is to allow the congregation to vote on the issue of disaffiliation.

On February 16, 2023, at 6 PM, the Southwest Georgia District Superintendent, Reverend Doreen Smalls, will attend a meeting with the Church Council in Ford Hall. She will discuss the disaffiliation process and answer questions. It is our plan that the date for the congregational meeting for a vote will be scheduled that night. The congregation will be notified and informed of that date, time, and process as soon as it is scheduled.

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 current 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 their properties. 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 a 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 would not 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. The Trustees 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 exactly will the voting ballot say?

A congregational vote about disaffiliation is limited. There will be only one question on the ballot:

“Shall Albany First United Methodist Church disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church for reasons of conscience over disagreements related to human sexuality, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues? Yes or No?”

A Yes vote is a vote for disaffiliation from the United Methodist denomination. A No vote is a vote not to disaffiliate and to remain affiliated with the United Methodist Church. Any subsequent decisions would be by a separate vote later, upon recommendation of the Church Council.

If the congregational vote results in disaffiliation, would our church continue to operate under our current Book of Discipline until the South Georgia Annual Conference in May, 2023?

Yes. A church is still a United Methodist Church until disaffiliation is confirmed by the Annual Conference, even if the vote was months before.

What would be the timeline for next steps/decisions if our church votes to disaffiliate?

Next steps will be determined by the Church Council. If the church chooses to disaffiliate or depart, one of the following decisions may be made later:

1. Join another Wesleyan/Methodist denomination
2. Become an independent Church

A recommendation will be made during the preparation and follow-up to any potential disaffiliation vote. The timeline would depend on which denomination might be recommended, the current status of that denomination, and requirements that they have. It could be immediate, or the church could stay independent for a short period of time while other decisions are being considered. An independent period would require action by the Church Council to outline the organization of the church in the interim.

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 as a United Methodist Church, becoming an independent church, or affiliating with another Methodist denomination 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.

How can we ensure that any new denomination's Book of Discipline would be comparable to our current UMC Book of Discipline?

A sub-committee of the Discernment Team is researching several other Wesleyan/Methodist denominations, assessing their doctrines and practices according to our identity, mission, and vision. If the need arises after the congregational vote, the Discernment Team will present information to the Church Council, including theological views, social principles such as ordination of female clergy, ordination of homosexual clergy, same-sex marriage, as well as trust clause requirements, clergy appointments, and affiliation costs and processes. The Church Council would then present their recommendation for a vote by the church membership.

What will happen at the 2024 General Conference?

The dates have been set for April 24-May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, NC. 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

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). As proposed legislation is submitted for consideration, we will learn more about the possibilities, although, even then, we will not know what the General Conference will do until it meets.

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) that 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 continue have access to accurate, pertinent information. Similarly, we will also have a chance to share our thoughts with the Discernment Team, Church Council, and other members on at a congregational information meeting on February 5 during the Sunday School hour. There will be at least one similar meeting prior to a congregational vote.

The final and most important part of discernment is intentional prayer. Beginning on September 4th, our pastor called us into a season of prayer and fasting. Each day at noon, we are invited to pause for prayer on behalf of our church. Additionally, each Thursday, we 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”).