

The United Methodist Church and the State of the UM Connection

Where we Have Been

In 1972 the first statement about homosexuality was included in the Discipline. It affirmed the sacred worth of all persons and also put restrictions on who could be ordained. Since 1972 this issue has been debated at every General Conference. The way things get added or changed in the Book of Discipline is a lot like the way things get added to the law code in our country – democratically and politically, and the process is often messy. Because General Conference is a legislative body, it is often impossible to predict what will or will not be changed at GC because changes can be made up until the moment something passes, doesn't pass, or is amended on the floor and passed.

In 2016 the General Conference called for a special General Conference to deal with our statements about human sexuality as it pertains to LGBTQ persons. The 2019 Special Session of the General Conference was the last time this body met, which was where the “Traditional Plan” was passed and [the current statements](#) about homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of LGBTQ persons did not fundamentally change. In addition, the 2019 Special Session approved an “exit plan” or “disaffiliation plan” which is now paragraph #2553 in our Book of Discipline.

The special conference did not ultimately result in changed language at that time but revealed that a process of separation was likely necessary. A group of UMC leaders worked with a mediator and created what they called A Protocol for Grace through Separation. It would have given \$30 million to Wesley Covenant Association to help fund a new Methodist expression and would have created a process where those churches desiring to become part of that would have a process of moving their affiliation and property. It was to have been voted on in 2020. The 2020 General Conference did not happen because of the pandemic. GC was postponed to 2022.

In March of this year, the Commission on the General Conference [officially postponed](#) General Conference again until 2024. This means, among other things, that petitions and legislation related to “[The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#)” and other related items have been delayed until then. GC is not happening in 2022, primarily because those who would travel to the US for GC faced many barriers and delays to travel, passport and visa backlogs, and other things related to the pandemic.

When it was announced that the GC was being postponed until 2024, the Wesley Covenant Association announced it would be launching a new Methodist denomination, called the Global Methodist Church. That denomination officially launched on May 1, 2022. The GMC currently has a website and a transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline, but the denomination will be in transition for the next 12-24 months or more, until they can convene their first General Conference to ratify their shared organizational documents and doctrinal statements.

Where We Are

On May 23rd, the 6th Sunday of Easter, I reflected in my message on the early church described in the book of Acts 16:6-15, and how the believers and missionaries had to bathe every decision, every action, and every course adjustment on their missionary journeys in a spirit of prayer, seeking to faithfully heed promptings and warnings from the Holy Spirit along the way.

I write today in that same spirit of prayer and hopefulness about the future of SUMC and of our larger United Methodist Connection. It is no secret that the United Methodist Church is deeply divided. As one pastor put it, we are “*divided over issues of governance, autonomy, scriptural interpretation, and inclusion. How shall we relate to one another? How much autonomy should the local church have? How do we read and interpret the Holy Scriptures? Who is welcome and how far does that welcome extend? These are all big questions with no easy answers.*”

It has become clear that some clergy and churches in our annual conference and in the larger UM Connection desire to exit the denomination now rather than wait for 2024. To address this situation, Bishop Lenard Fairley [sent an email to the conference](#) on May 17, 2022, to lay out the [NC Annual Conference requirements for clergy and churches](#) who desire to exit the denomination under #2553.

Evangelical Dinner Recording and FAQ Sheet

Some of you have received information that has been sent out by those leading the Evangelical Fellowship gathering that took place at Covenant Church in Greenville the week of Annual Conference. It includes a 90-minute video presentation with Branson Sheets and three additional panelists (Tim Reaves, Greg Jenks, and Scott Dodson) along with an attached FAQ sheet about how to proceed with disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church. It is a lot of information to process, but I would like to address a few of my observations and feedback to that correspondence. Please see the WCA FAQ sheet below with my observations and feedback in red.

The video that is also being shared is around 90 minutes of **how** and **what**, with just a quick 2-3 minutes on **why** a church should disaffiliate or **why** a pastor should withdraw. I would add an additional question that I consider inadequately addressed: **why now?** These more pressing questions are deserving of attention and serious reflection.

The Continuing United Methodist Church

At this moment in our common life together, the majority of United Methodist Clergy and United Methodist Congregations are not leaving the denomination. The question may need to be asked: *Why continue in the United Methodist Church?* There are too many reasons to name here, but please talk with others - clergy and laity – who are remaining United Methodists. Ask them what excites them about the future. The United Methodist Church will remain a big tent. We may not all think alike, but we believe we can all love alike. We are a church that would prefer to be defined by **what we are for** rather than **what we are against**.

The Council of Bishops also made an official statement in November last year about remaining United Methodist:

“All of our members, clergy, local churches, and annual conferences will continue to have a home in the future United Methodist Church, whether they consider themselves liberal, evangelical, progressive, traditionalist, middle of the road, conservative, centrist, or something else. We hold on to our Wesleyan heritage that “the living core of the Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason”.

(The full episcopal letter from November 4, 2021 is worth reading and it is cut and pasted below near the end of this document)

Personal note from Pastor Kevin

If you ever hear that the UMC and those continuing in the UMC are not deeply biblical, orthodox in their faith, committed to their covenant vows, striving to follow Jesus, and yearning to grow more in holiness of heart and life – please know they are not talking about me nor the holy friends, colleagues, teachers, and professors in the United Methodist Church that have shaped me over the years in my spiritual walk.

I have been a United Methodist for over 30 years, and a United Methodist pastor now for 28 years, serving in only four appointments which now includes the amazing and mission-focused saints I am privileged to be in ministry with here at Swansboro United Methodist Church. Over these past few months, I have come to even greater clarity for me personally regarding this moment in our UM Connection. I am and will continue to be a United Methodist pastor and have no interest in withdrawing from the UMC.

I have not always agreed with all the stances that are the official position of the UMC as voted on at General Conference, but I affirm the UMC’s [Articles of Religion](#), [Confession of Faith](#), our Wesleyan theology ([including the Standard Sermons](#) and the [Explanatory Notes](#)), and our connectional way of being church. I have been grateful for the big tent United Methodist Church, where people of different political convictions, theological interpretive lens, and differences on how they read and understand the Bible are able to come together in shared worship, love, and in amazing outreach, service, and risk-taking mission in Jesus’ name.

When this local church and community was impacted by hurricane Florence in 2018, it was the UM Connection and the UM Committee on Relief that was here immediately, with support, grant funds, and soon-there-after, a remote Disaster Recovery Site with one site manager, two construction managers, and two case workers to help over 250 individuals and families get back into their homes over the next year and a half.

That has always described the people called Methodists from our early beginnings. You can see the evidence all around us, from schools and orphanages to health care and prisons, from ecumenical conversations to digging wells in Liberia, from universities to hospitals – all various ways Methodists have impacted our communities and shared the gospel in ways that change people’s actual lives. We are a people of a **both/and** theology, not an **either/or** one. One Wesleyan scholar called it our “conjunctive” theology. We believe that our faith is both deeply personal and communal; that it both addresses life in the here and now and life with God after

death; that Jesus cares not only about hungry and lost souls, but hungry and lost bodies that are experiencing pain, poverty, displacement and oppression.

In short, I believe my best future as a pastor lies with the United Methodist Church. I also want to say that I believe not just my future, but Swansboro UMC's best future lies with the United Methodist Church. In saying that, I do not mean to imply that we are all of one mind about human sexuality. Rather, I believe, based on the evidence of my three years here so far, that there is not an overwhelming sense among us that our church should organize primarily around having agreement on the issues of human sexuality. I simply don't see it as the number one driving issue for us in terms of what we give missional priority to, what energizes our conversations, what inspires our hope for the future, or what many have shared as their aspirations for our church.

While I do not think we are all in agreement about human sexuality and what the church needs to look like in regard to welcoming and accepting LGBTQ persons, I nevertheless think that there is a growing consensus that we should not separate from the sisters and brothers in our church family and also from the larger UM connection over this. I could be wrong, but that is my sense of where we are at this moment in our common life. To paraphrase 2 Kings 10:15: *If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand.*

Please pray about these matters and feel free to reach out if you have questions or need further information. I am certain that we will see some clergy and churches in our area leave the United Methodist Church. I prayerfully hope this church will not choose to be one of them. Even so, I know that many of the churches that do will likely be churches you know and that include people who are your friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family.

I would implore all of us, in the name of Jesus Christ, to pray for all in this season, including those with whom we disagree, both in our own church family and in the UMC. May we choose to not disparage others even as we engage in hard conversations. Let us pray and reason together, bathing all we do in prayer, as we seek to be true to the God of love and grace who continues to call us to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness as God's Easter people.

Options for Going Forward

- **Take no Action at this time.** Staying UM does not require any action now. This decision does not mean that the church has complete agreement over matters of human sexuality. It does say that as a church we sense that we do not need to divide over this issue. General Conference meets in 2024 and this and other issues that may be discussed or passed then can be addressed locally, as has been done during previous years.
- **Proceed with a Church Conference vote.** This would be gathering, presided over by our D.S. where all professing members present and voting would vote for or against disaffiliation. Requires a 2/3 majority to disaffiliate per para. 2553.

FAQ Handed out at WCA Meeting (in black)

Red Responses Added by Pastor Kevin

Below is a document that has been shared via email with some of the laity and clergy in our conference and was first handed out at an Evangelical Fellowship Dinner meeting in Greenville on June 15th. The text in black is the unedited FAQ sheet that was handed out. The red responses have been added by Pastor Kevin after studying the material, following up with conference leadership, and checking minor points on Disciplinary discrepancies, dates, and details.

Important Details Concerning Disaffiliation and other Frequently Asked Questions

1. **How does the process of disaffiliation work in our conference?** There is a website link on the conference webpage (nccumc.org/disaffiliation) that will take you to the most updated information. There is a lot of information there, but it is the first place to start.

Each church should begin by making an inquiry about disaffiliation. Filling out the form does NOT obligate the church to do anything. It DOES give the church the exact numbers they will owe to exit the UMC.

The formula is the same for every church: payment of the current year of apportionments (if they have not been paid already), plus one additional year of apportionments (calculated on the 2022 figures UNLESS the 2023 are less....if so the conference will use the 2023....whichever is most favorable to the local church), plus the church's fair share of the pension liability of the annual conference (this number is pretty close to 2.5 times the church's annual apportionment payments).

All the money must be paid upfront before the church can leave. Since we are disaffiliating, the conference will have no way to collect from us after we leave, so it is the cleanest method for them and for us too (we will not owe the UMC any money).

In making the inquiry, the DS will receive notification that the church inquired, but when the church is ready to move forward, the church council should request a church conference (in writing to the DS) to be held in the fall before the special session of Annual Conference in November.

The apportionment calculation for Swansboro UMC for 2022 was \$114,640. Kevin Frazier, our Council Chair has already requested a total amount from the NC Conference for informational purposes only. We have since received the total cost should SUMC disaffiliate: \$514, 421.

This would be in addition to the 1.3 million debt we still have on building #3 (we pay close to \$23,000 a month on this mortgage). The full amount for disaffiliation must be received by the Annual Conference, along with all other deliverables mentioned in the Disaffiliation Document details by the NCC before the date of disaffiliation, or the agreement is null and void.

- 2. When and where is the special called session of Annual Conference?** Bishop Fairley will announce it at Annual Conference the week of June 15-18. The conference leadership shared that it would likely be on a weekend in Raleigh.

Saturday, November 19, 2022, at Jarvis Memorial UMC in Greenville.

- 3. What is the process for asking to take a vote on disaffiliation?** Typically, the church council will request a church conference for the business of disaffiliation. The DS will schedule the meeting and it will have to be announced publicly two times in 10 days just like a regular charge conference.

Only members of the church will be allowed to vote at the church conference. Your DS will have instructions for the recording secretary/membership secretary in preparation for the event. FYI: The conference will not be virtual. All voting will be by paper ballot and in person.

The Council chair or some other designate will bring the motion to the floor to disaffiliate and the floor will open for discussion. After discussion has been completed, there will be a ballot supplied by the DS that will say something like: "On the matter of disaffiliation I vote Yes or I vote No or I abstain." The ballots will be counted by the DS and secretary (and if the vote is close, the pastor will be asked to recheck them). A 2/3 vote (of votes cast, not total membership) in the affirmative is necessary for disaffiliation. The DS will share the number necessary before the vote is taken and announce the results at the end.

The 2/3 vote means a church vote must reach 66% in the affirmative to move forward with disaffiliation. Said differently, if 35% of those members present and voting said "no" to disaffiliation, then it could not move forward in the process. Some have suggested this is too high a bar. SUMC usually seeks to proceed with consensus, a much higher bar, in part because of how much we value taking time with each other in the midst of differences, listening deeply when there are reservations, and trying to seek unity and consensus if at all possible. I believe the 2/3 bar attempts to slow churches down a bit to do the same hard and patient work of discernment rather than a simple 50% + 1 that usually quickly divides a room into winners and losers.

- 4. What is the deadline for scheduling a church conference this fall?** There is not a deadline, but a church should make their request as soon as possible. The church conference is required to be held within 120 days of the request, but the cabinet is committed to accommodating every church that wants to meet the November date for disaffiliation.

A Church can disaffiliate under para. #2553 anytime between now and December, 31, 2023. In addition to the special Annual Conference in November of 2022, we will have another in June of 2023 and the bishop has said an additional special Annual Conference will be held in the fall of 2023 as well to accommodate churches that desire to disaffiliate.

5. **Will there be other opportunities for disaffiliation besides this special called session of annual conference in November?** Yes, next June (2023) there will be some churches that will disaffiliate and maybe again next fall.

Same answer as above under #4.

A couple of things to know: 1) paragraph 2553 in the UM Discipline has an expiration date of December 31, 2023. Churches wanting to disaffiliate must complete the process before that date; and 2) The current requirements are subject to change. If the North Carolina Conference receives a new bishop in January 2023, then the new bishop would have to approve these plans. They might or they might not do so, and there is no way to know in advance. We do know that these requirements are good through December of this year.

The conference board of trustees put this process together in consultation with the bishop, and have approved this process through December 2023 already, regardless of episcopal changes in the future.

6. **What happens if the church and their current pastor disagree on disaffiliation?** The church may still disaffiliate, and the pastor will be reassigned in January (or whenever the disaffiliation takes place). If the pastor wants to align with the Global Methodist Church, then the church will receive a new UM pastor. There is no provision for a GM pastor to serve a UM church or a UM pastor to serve a GM church.

This paragraph leaves much more to be discussed specifically for SUMC should we decide to call for a church conference and if we were to disaffiliate. Pastor Kevin will be remaining United Methodist. A straw poll of many of the staff and lay leadership have said the same. In the eventuality that SUMC voted to disaffiliate by December of 2022, Pastor Kevin would be reappointed by January 1 (or whichever date was chosen for disaffiliation). To be clear, using that date for illustration, that would mean that by January 1 there would be no connection to the UMC, no D.S. to consult with for pastoral leadership, no bishop to call, etc.

It should also be clear that a vote to disaffiliate is NOT A VOTE to AFFILIATE with another denomination. Estimates vary on how many churches are considering disaffiliation – some say anywhere between 10% and 20% - but it is impossible to know for sure. Current indications across the United Methodist Church in the U.S. suggest that around half of the churches that are disaffiliating will not be affiliating with the GMC (Frazier UMC in Alabama, now “Frazier Church,” became a part of the Free Methodist Church; many others are becoming non-denom).

Other long-standing church denominations that are Wesleyan in their theology and that have a connectional aspect to their governance include: The Nazarene Church, Free Methodist, Wesleyan Church, etc. These churches have a long-established history and infrastructure, unlike the GMC which is in its infancy and is in transition (meaning it cannot fully address matters of shared conviction and governance until it holds its first General Conference sometime over the next 2 years or more).

There is also no provision in the national transitional team for the GMC for how to provide for a pastor in cases of a church like SUMC – so there are a lot of unanswered questions for how to proceed in this in-between time. It is likely all such decisions would be left to the local church leadership. A recent email from Bishop Fairley has indicated that the cabinet would access available appointments and seek to act in a way that would help both pastor and church in the transition.

7. **What will be the official date of disaffiliation?** If the church votes to leave, the official date will be December 31, 2022. A church will need to change their official documents, titles, constitution, etc. A church will not be required to get rid of their UM Hymnals or choir robes with the cross and flame symbols on them. They should make plans to change their church signs and stationery.

The official date can be determined. To do so under paragraph #2553, it just must be completed by December 31, 2023.

8. **Why should a church consider joining the GMC after leaving the UMC?** The Global Methodist Church is going to be a different kind of church than the UMC. We will truly be people who are like minded theologically and biblically. We will focus on evangelism and worship and service. Our pastors will be trained by seminaries that we can trust to produce the highest quality pastors possible. Finally, it is good for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity (and keep their promises to each other) and unity will be the hallmark of the GMC across many continents.

Three other reasons: 1) Each church will OWN its property and there will be no trust clause keeping them from leaving as there now is in the United Methodist Church. We will voluntarily be joined with each other. 2) Each local church will have the resources and pool of pastors from the GMC to draw on. The process of appointment will also be different. Each local church will have much more say into who comes to pastor their church. 3) The apportionments of the GMC will be much lower and will be for planting new churches and seeing people come to Christ rather than funding bureaucracy. Most of us are excited to be a part of the Global Methodist Church.

Why should a church consider remaining a United Methodist? I would encourage everyone to go to umc.org and read about the BeUMC campaign. You can also read my personal reflections above under “The Continuing United Methodist Church. <https://www.umc.org/en/who-we-are/our-people/beumc>

9. **What about a church whose pastor/council will not discuss the issues behind disaffiliation?** 10% of a church’s members can request a church conference. The best place to start would certainly be the church council, but where the council refuses to discuss, the members can petition the DS.

The BOD paragraph 248 details how a church conference can be called and it is also referenced in paragraph 2553. The SUMC Church Council meet on June 23, 2022 to discuss Bishop Fairley’s email from May and the Conference Board of

Trustees information about disaffiliation. It was decided then to have a couple of information sessions to make our church members aware of the information that is being shared and sent and to address those who would like to know more.

Our pastor and our leadership desire to be transparent about all related concerns and questions as we seek God's guidance in this season. It should be noted that even those at SUMC who have expressed interest in our church disaffiliating or perusing a called church conference have also said that they do not believe our church would come close to reaching 66% to do so.

10. What will a GM church have to pay in pension payments for their pastor?

There will be NO pension in the GMC. We will move to a more up-to-date retirement plan. It is still being worked out, but we have it on good authority that it will be similar to this:

Currently, the church pays 3% into the pastor's CRSP called the defined contribution. The pastor also is required to pay 3% into their UM Personal Investment Plan (sort of like a 401K). The church pays 7.3% into the pastor's CRSP for the defined benefit (pension part).

Since there will be NO pension in the GMC, each church will pay 10% into the pastor's defined contribution account and each pastor will be required to pay 5% into their PIP (personal account).

In other words, the church will pay about the same as they do now (a little less) and the denomination will benefit with no pension liability. The GMC will continue to work with Wespeth just like the UMC does now.

Wespeth, who works with UMC pensions has worked hard to allow other churches to continue to use their service and it may well look like this though the details are still unclear.

11. Does the church need to secure an attorney? No and Yes. The process of disaffiliation (at least for our conference) already has a legal contract worked out by the conference attorney. We will simply fill it out and sign it. The church will need an attorney to work on its legal documents.

If a church were to continue with the disaffiliation process, an attorney would be highly recommended to address things like securing a new name, new titles, new loan and official deeds and documents, logo, and liabilities, etc.



A Narrative for the Continuing United Methodist Church

United Methodists all over the globe are liturgical, contemporary, charismatic, social activists, urban, suburban, small town, rural and much more. We are children, youth, young adults, senior adults, new Christians, and mature Christians. We are present on four continents, in more than 45 countries, and we comprise an unknown number of cultures and languages. We are a holy communion of different races, ethnicities, cultures, and perspectives united by the Holy Spirit, driven by the mission of Christ, and bearing the good news of an unmerited grace that changes lives and transforms communities.

Christ's prayer for our unity and command to gather all to the table, to make space for one another, appreciate one another, and look for Christ in each other, prohibit us from creating individual tables only for those who think, act, look, and perceive the world like we do. We cannot be a church that fractures its identity and commitment to Christ by aligning itself with political parties. We cannot be a traditional church or a progressive church or a centrist church. We cannot be a gay or straight church. Our churches must be more than echo chambers made in our own image arguing with each other while neglecting our central purpose. This is the way of the world.

Instead, we must be one people, rooted in scripture, centered in Christ, serving in love and united in the essentials. It is hard work. It is sacred work. It is the ministry of reconciliation that Christ gave to each of us. Our best witness is to love each other as Christ loves us, to show the world the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to bind us together despite our differences. This is living out the gospel.

We are a church:

- Confident in what God has done in Christ Jesus for all humankind
- Committed to personal and social salvation/transformation
- Courageous in dismantling the powers of racism, tribalism, and colonialism

All of our members, clergy, local churches, and annual conferences will continue to have a home in the future United Methodist Church, whether they consider themselves liberal, evangelical, progressive, traditionalist, middle of the road, conservative, centrist, or something else. We hold on to our Wesleyan heritage that “the living core of the Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason”.

We are longing for a United Methodist Church that will move towards new forms of being a connectional church, a General Conference focused on global essentials, and an empowerment of regions for contextually relevant forms of living our common mission mandate. Deeply rooted in the Doctrinal Standards of the UMC,

we pledge to exercise our episcopal role in ways that enable as many United Methodists, lay and clergy, as are willing to remain in the UMC and – together – to continue in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And, because we are part of the Church Universal, we seek to be united visibly and in ministries with other parts of the Body of Christ in God’s mission for the human family and creation.

We are committed to strengthening every local church, where the word is preached and Christ is offered, and where the table is set before all who hunger and thirst for righteousness, confident in the prayer we have learned to say and share:

- Make us one with Christ—this is faithfulness.
- Make us one with each other—this is unity.
- Make us one in ministry to all the world—this is fruitfulness.

This is the United Methodist Church we love and serve!

Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church
November 4, 2021