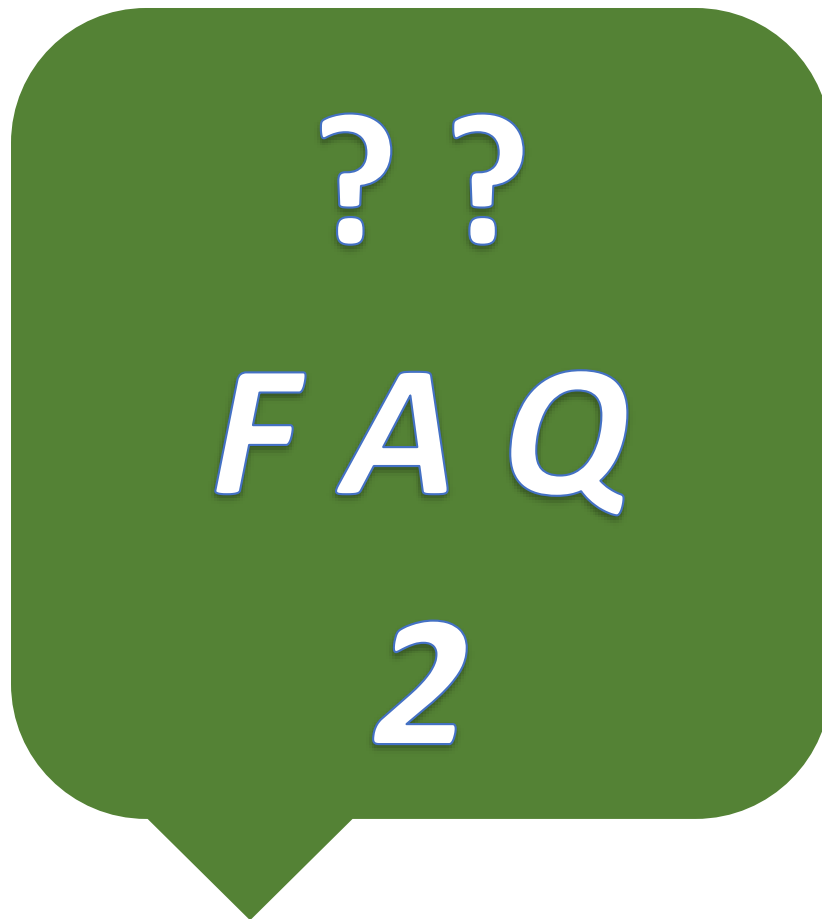


UNITED METHODIST CHURCH UPDATE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

May 15, 2023



Starkville First United Methodist Church
200 W. Lampkin St., Starkville, MS 39759
(662) 323-5722 **www.first-umc.org**

1. WHAT ARE THE GENERAL CONFERENCE ISSUES?

Much of the discussion is necessarily tied to presenting issues surrounding human sexuality, specifically the prohibitions on the ordination of LGBT persons and LGBT weddings. However, many of the deeper challenges facing the United Methodist Church are rooted in organizational dysfunction, distrust, and doctrine. A prime example is that many Annual Conferences and bishops have been arbitrary or punitive in their application of the provisions for disaffiliation set forth in the *Book of Discipline* and this has resulted in numerous lawsuits.^[1]

In some Annual Conferences, clergy are not being held to the existing *Book of Discipline*. Most notable is the entire Western Jurisdiction which has a stated policy which stands in opposition to the *Discipline* regarding the ordination of LGBT clergy.^[2] The United Methodist Church currently has two married, LGBT bishops, Karen Oliveto and Cedrick D. Bridgeforth. They were elected and consecrated in spite of prohibitions to the contrary and without consequence to those who elected them.^[3] Even when official complaints were brought forth they were ignored or dismissed.^[4]

The Minnesota Annual Conference has issued guidance which will require pastors who choose not to perform same sex weddings to help facilitate them.^[5] An extreme example of the challenges being made to the *Book of Discipline* is the situation of the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference which has approved a drag queen as a Certified Candidate for Ordination.^[6]

People often ask why traditionalists would leave the denomination and not those who are undermining the Discipline. While there have been proposals for entire Annual Conferences to withdraw from the denomination these were ruled invalid by the Judicial Council.^[7] Research shows that conservatives are generally the group that has left their denomination when there is a split in a mainline Protestant denomination, such as has occurred in the Episcopalians Lutheran, and Presbyterian church.^[8]

^[1] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/judge-lifts-north-georgia-disaffiliation-pause>

^[2] <https://westernjurisdictionumc.org/safe-harbor-declaration/>

^[3] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/western-elects-cedrick-bridgeforth-as-bishop>

^[4] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/complaint-filed-against-gay-bishops-consecration>

^[5] <https://www.minnesotaumc.org/faqs-together>

^[6] <https://www.mspennycost.com/>

^[7] <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/decision-1444>

^[8] albertmohler.com/2020/01/06/briefing-1-6-20

2. WHAT ABOUT BISHOPS?

Bishops are elected within a Jurisdiction by the lay and clergy delegates representing each Annual Conference. Although bishops do not vote at General Conference they serve as presiders over the agenda and debates and wield very significant influence. Additionally, at the Annual Conference level bishops have direct supervisory authority over clergy and direct administrative authority over the affairs of Annual Conference.

Our Mississippi Bishop, Sharma Lewis has been clear about her intention to abide by the *Book of Discipline* and that she bases her position on her belief in the Bible. Many other bishops are currently enforcing the *Book of Discipline*, even if reluctantly by their own admission, but not all are doing so. The denomination does not have an adequate mechanism for holding bishops accountable, nor do they hold one another accountable. For example, when Bishop Melvin Talbert performed a same-sex wedding over the objections of the resident bishop in Alabama, she brought charges against him which were dismissed.^[9]

A few bishops have directly challenged the theology and polity of the church which they took a vow to defend.^[10] A foundational dispute surrounds differing views of Scriptural interpretation and application. For instance, past president of the Council of Bishops, Ken Carter, in defending his progressive leadership of the church said he has “always believed that we have to adapt our doctrine and our Scriptures to changing life circumstances that people have.”^[11] Bishop Karen Oliveto declared that Jesus “didn’t have his life figured out ... We might think of him as the Rock of Ages, but he was more like a lump of clay, forming and reforming himself in relation to God. If Jesus can change, if he can give up his bigotries and prejudices ... then so can we.”^[12]

In his recent address to the Council of Bishops, President Thomas Bickerton denied that the bishops had any responsibility for the problems the denomination is facing and placed blame for the divisiveness on traditionalists. This was enthusiastically supported by those present.^[13]

^[9] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishop-again-officiates-at-same-gender-nuptials>

^[10] <https://goodnewsmag.org/name-that-bishop/>

^[11] <https://www.theledger.com/story/news/2022/07/26/polk-county-florida-churches-among-106-suing-leave-united-methodist-denomination/10084929002/>

^[12] <https://www.christianpost.com/news/lesbian-umc-bishop-complaint-jesus-held-bigotries-made-into-idol.html>

^[13] <https://www.facebook.com/umcbishops/videos/775435634283500>

3. HOW DOES THIS IMPACT MISSISSIPPI?

At the upcoming Mississippi Annual Conference in June 2023, it is anticipated that nearly 200 churches will be approved for disaffiliation. This includes many larger congregations and some in the Starkville District. Combined with over 60 churches which closed or disaffiliated earlier, the total represents close to one-third of churches in Mississippi. Additional churches will request disaffiliation at the December 9th

Conference. Many other congregations are in a discernment period. It should be noted that some have taken a vote on disaffiliation and decided to remain within the United Methodist Church for the time being.

In response to the large number of departing churches the Annual Conference has launched an initiative called Lighthouse Churches which will provide new, in some cases virtual, opportunities for church growth.^[14] A significant concern is the financial viability of the Annual Conference administration. A plan is in place to reduce the number of Districts from 11 to 7. Additionally, projections are being made for significant reductions in future Conference budgets, but it is uncertain by how much or in what areas. It is likely that remaining churches will have to make up the funding difference through increased mission shares/apportionments.^[15]

There is currently a case pending before the Board of Ordained Ministry regarding a recent LGBT+ wedding performed in Mississippi which has been determined to be in violation of the *Book of Discipline*. While Bishop Lewis has taken initial action against the ministers involved, it will be up to the Board of Ordained Ministry and the Conference clergy to deal with the case at the June session Annual Conference.^[16]

^[14] <https://www.mississippi-umc.org/newsdetail/creating-safe-harbor-lighthouse-congregations-17396483>

^[15] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mDZTf0GMGY&feature=youtu.be>

^[16] <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/ordained-ministry/mississippi-bishop-moves-forward-with-trial-involuntary-leav/>

4. WHAT IS THE DISAFFILIATION PROCESS?

The 2019 General Conference approved a process by which churches could withdraw, or disaffiliate, from the denomination, over issues regarding human sexuality. This is outlined in paragraph 2553 of the *Book of Discipline*.^[17]

Annual Conference leadership held an initial Exploratory Meeting on February 12th at Starkville First UMC. Afterward, we were notified that there was a 30-day time limit to request a Church Conference vote for disaffiliation. This deadline has since been extended for our congregation until August 15th. The *Book of Discipline* authorizes the Administrative Board, by simple majority, to request the District Superintendent to call a Church Conference for the purpose of conducting a disaffiliation vote in accordance with ¶2553.

A Church Conference is presided over by the District Superintendent and requires that a disaffiliation vote “must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference.” There is no provision for a quorum. If passed, the Annual Conference would then vote on ratification, at the December 9, 2023, special session, requiring a simple majority of the participating Conference delegates for approval.

All professing members of the congregation are eligible to vote in a Church Conference. Professing membership generally includes any youth who have joined the church as part of their confirmation class or by profession of faith at another time. All youth ministry teaching is conducted in keeping with current United Methodist theology, history, and polity.

^[17] <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-discipline-2553-disaffiliation-over-human-sexuality>

5. WHAT ARE THE PROPERTY AND FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS?

In the United Methodist Church, the Annual Conference owns the property, not the local church, through a provision called the Trust Clause. In the case of disaffiliation under the *Book of Discipline* ¶2553 the property is transferred to the congregation upon the payment of disaffiliation costs. This opportunity expires on December 31, 2023. Some Annual Conferences other than Mississippi have added additional property costs for disaffiliation up to one-half of the property value.

The Mississippi Annual Conference Board of Trustees has offered a temporary plan to utilize ¶2549 of the *Book of Discipline* to allow churches to exit the denomination after December 31, 2023.^[18] However, this proposal is not binding, and involves many additional steps, and results in the closure of the church, with the congregation then having to buy back the property with no guarantees of approval or of the negotiated price.^[19] It is uncertain if the Annual Conference would release a church at the much reduced disaffiliation price given actual higher property values in many locations. Significantly, ¶2549 is the mechanism which has been recently used in other Annual Conferences, such as North Carolina, to close churches considering disaffiliation without their agreement.^[20]

The disaffiliation cost in 2023 for Starkville First UMC is estimated to be \$981,131. This includes two years of mission shares/apportionments (\$459,644), and an unfunded pension liability assessment (\$521,487). These numbers are subject to change with market fluctuations. If the church were to disaffiliate in 2023 half of the mission share amount will have already been paid and the remainder will have already been budgeted for 2024. There are adequate reserve funds which could be used for the balance of the disaffiliation costs. It is important to note that disaffiliation after 2023 will result, at the very least, in another year of mission share/apportionment payment of about \$225,000.

The Annual Conference is working to decrease its operating budget as churches disaffiliate though it is unknown at this time what the final financial impact will be at the end of 2023. If the Conference does not significantly reduce the budget it is likely that remaining churches will be required to make up the difference. It should be noted that most other denominations require less financial support from local churches than the Mississippi Annual Conference.

^[18] <https://www.mississippi-umc.org/newsdetail/miss-conference-trustee-adopt-motion-to-extend-disaffiliation-process-after-2023-17092968>

^[19] <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-discipline-2549-disposition-of-property-of-a-closed-local-church>

^[20] <https://www.christianpost.com/news/nc-church-trying-to-leave-umc-is-shut-down-by-denomination.html>

6. WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS BEYOND THE UMC?

If a congregation disaffiliates from the United Methodist Church it could join one of several pan-Wesleyan denominations. These include The Free Methodist Church, The Wesleyan Church, and The Global Methodist Church which will soon form a provisional conference encompassing Mississippi and West Tennessee. It is also possible to be an independent congregation, possibly aligned with one of the newly forming church networks. A chart summarizing the basic differences is attached at the end of this document.

7. WHY ARE WE HAVING THIS DISCUSSION NOW?

Our congregation is healthy and growing. Our people have consistently expressed a desire to remain together and continue with our current ministry. Our congregation is not required to call for a Church Conference vote. There are valid reasons to remain in the United Methodist Church as there are to disaffiliate from the UMC. However, denominational events beyond our local church require us to face new challenges and understand the issues. We are a connectional church and the actions, or inactions, of one annual conference or bishop or local church impacts all of us.

The United Methodist Church is splintering and by the end of 2023 several thousand congregations in the United States will have disaffiliated. Central Conferences in Europe, Asia, and Africa are making similar decisions. Over half of the churches in the neighboring North Alabama Annual Conference and the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference have voted to leave. It is much the same across the rest of the Southeastern Jurisdiction, and even more so in some other parts of the country. There are generally fewer disaffiliations in the Northeastern and Western Jurisdictions.

No one knows for certain what action General Conference will take in 2024 until it has met. Nevertheless, there has been no resolution of the divisions within the church even with a special General Conference called solely for this purpose, involving three years of study and over five million dollars of expense. Now, in addition to the four-year delay, the Judicial Council has ruled that there must be additional General Conferences held in 2024, 2026, and 2028.^[21]

It is unlikely that there will be any further exit plans offered for local churches at General Conference 2024. Many traditionalist delegates have left the UMC and the voting margins should be tighter. Additionally, the signatories of the Protocol for Grace and Separation have withdrawn their support. The trend is for bishops and annual conferences to restrict, not expand, the process for churches desiring to leave the

denomination. At a recent Council of Bishops meeting, those gathered overwhelmingly endorsed President Thomas Bickerton's call to celebrate the arrival of December 31, 2023, the end of disaffiliation, as the beginning of a new season of Jubilee in the denomination.^[22]

Since the disaffiliation provisions of ¶2553 expire after December 31, 2023, Bishop Sharma Lewis has called a special session of the Mississippi Annual Conference for December 9, 2023 as the last opportunity for disaffiliation. The Annual Conference has given our congregation a deadline of August 15, 2023 to decide on a request for a Church Conference to vote on disaffiliation.

^[21] <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/judicial-council-decision-1472>

^[22] <https://www.facebook.com/umcbishops/videos/775435634283500>

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The information presented in this document is in response to questions raised in our Annual Conference Exploratory Meeting, the session with Bishop Sharma Lewis, and the four congregational gatherings. Additional perspectives on reasons for remaining with, or disaffiliating from, the United Methodist Church are provided below through two commonly accessed links. Additional questions and comments can be submitted at: umcupdates@first-umc.org.

[Stay UMC](https://www.stayumc.com/articles/) (<https://www.stayumc.com/articles/>)

Formed by leaders in the North Alabama Annual Conference *Stay UMC* has compiled several resources for consideration regarding remaining in the United Methodist Church.

[Bishop Scott Jones](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdYtH0tv13I) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdYtH0tv13I>)

Bishop Scott Jones was a leader in the United Methodist Church and upon retirement he resigned from the denomination and become a bishop of the Global Methodist Church.

WESLEYAN/METHODIST DENOMINATIONAL COMPARISON							
Denomination	Doctrine	Trust Clause	Bishops	Clergy Appt.	Apportionments	Size	History
United Methodist	Wesleyan, lack of accountability	Yes, local church holds property for conference	Elected for life	Yearly appointed by bishop/DS, some congregational input	7-15 percent of budget (varies by annual conference)	13 million members globally, 6.2 million in U.S., 30,000 churches (2020)	Founded 1968, merger of predecessor denominations founded in 1784, 1800, and 1803
Global Methodist	Wesleyan, adds Nicene and Apostles Creed, More robust accountability	No	Elected for a term (TBD at Convening GC) Likely 12-year limit	Appointed by bishop/DS, more congregational input, possible congregational search	2 percent of operating income, with a 6.5 percent cap	Projected 2,400 to 4,000 churches, 240,000 to 400,000 members in U.S. (2024)	Founded 2022
Free Methodist	Wesleyan	Yes, local church holds property for conference; property transferring in is exempt	Elected to 4-year terms, re-electable	Appointed by Ministerial Appointments Committee chaired by bishop	10-13 percent of previous year's income	77,000 members in U.S., 1,050 churches (2015)	Founded 1860, issues were abolishing slavery and eliminating pew rent
Wesleyan	Wesleyan	Yes, local church holds property for conference	One General Superintendent, 4-year term, re-electable	Congregational call system	11 percent of income	125,000 members, 1,500 churches in U.S. (2019)	Founded 1843, issue was abolishing slavery
Nazarene	Wesleyan	Yes, local church holds property for conference	Six General Superintendents, 4-year terms, re-electable	Congregational call system	15 percent of income, includes pastor's retirement	637,000 members, 5,280 churches in U.S. (2016)	Founded 1908, issue was focus on holiness
Congregational Methodist	Wesleyan	No	One president, minimal authority	Congregational call system	Decided by local church	15,000 members, 150 churches in U.S.	Founded 1852, issue was congregational government