

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH UPDATE
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

February 1, 2023



Starkville First United Methodist Church
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SUMMARY
 United Methodist Church Update
 February 1, 2023

1. How is The United Methodist Church Organized?
 - Legislative: General Conference (set theological and organization policy)
 - Executive: Bishops and denominational leaders (enacts policy and procedures)
 - Judicial: Judicial Council (rules on actions and decisions)
 - Southeastern Jurisdiction, Mississippi Annual Conference, Starkville District
 - Local church governed by committees, major decisions by Church Conference

2. How Did the United Methodist Church Get to This Critical Point?
 - Legislative deadlock at General Conference in 2016 around LGBTQ debate
 - General Conference 2019 reaffirmed Book of Discipline
 - Episcopal and leadership disobedience
 - COVID-19 delays General Conference in 2020, 2021, 2022.

3. What Are the Challenges Facing the Denomination?
 - Surge in congregational disaffiliations from UMC
 - Jurisdictional Conferences actions which will impact General Conference
 - Increasing disobedience to *Discipline* among some bishops and leaders

4. What is Disaffiliation?
 - 2019 *Discipline* provision (Para. 2553) allowing congregations to exit the UMC
 - Payment of apportionments and pension program, property to local church
 - Provision expires December 2023

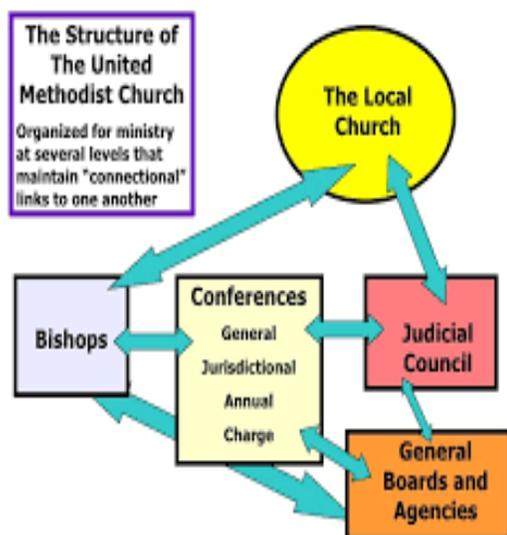
5. What About Human Sexuality?
 - UMC position unchanged since 1972
 - All persons of sacred worth, including those in LGBTQ community
 - UMC restrict rites of ordination and marriage for LGBTQ persons

6. How Does All of This Impact Our Congregation?
 - Major distraction from mission and ministry, drain on resources
 - Mississippi Methodism is intricately connected, many churches disaffiliating

7. How Does This Impact Our Clergy?
 - Retired clergy pensions are protected
 - Appointed clergy continue to serve under UMC or resign from Conference

8. What Is Next?
 - Exploratory Meeting with Annual Conference: Feb. 12, 2023 @ 5:00 p.m.
 - SFUMC Coffee and Conversation gatherings: Feb. 13th, Feb. 19th, Feb. 23rd, and, Mar. 5th (times and locations posted on website)

1. HOW IS THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH ORGANIZED?



It is helpful to know a bit about how the United Methodist Church is organized and how we make decisions as a denomination. Formed in 1968, the UMC is a worldwide denomination with 13 million members, half of whom reside outside the United States. The UMC is hierarchically structured and much like our government it is comprised of three branches.

The General Conference corresponds to the legislative branch. Meeting every four years it is comprised of over 800 lay and clergy delegates from around the world. This body sets our theology and rules, published as *The Book of Discipline*. This is our agreed upon

policy and procedures for our covenant life together as a denomination.^[1]

The executive function is provided the Council of Bishops, who serve four-year terms but are elected for life. In general, they are to provide vision and leadership for the entire denomination. Specifically, they are assigned to administer the ministry within an Annual Conference and provide direct supervision of the clergy.

The third branch, the Judicial Council, interprets and rules on church law. This nine-member body determines the constitutionality of the actions of the General Conference, reviews all episcopal decisions, and serves as the final court of appeal in the church's judicial system.

The United States is divided into five regions called Jurisdictions and their principal function is the election of bishops. Rev. Sharma D. Lewis is the presiding bishop of the Mississippi Annual Conference with offices in Jackson. Each Annual Conference also elects lay and clergy delegates to represent them at the General and Jurisdictional Conference level. In Mississippi there are over 900 churches, representing 150,000 lay persons, served by some 870 clergy, scattered over 11 Districts. Our church is located in the Starkville District and our Superintendent is Rev. Paulette Buford-James.

At the local level United Methodist churches are committee led and coordinated by the Administrative Board. That means that most actions within the church are routinely handled by smaller groups of elected officers. It is only decisions that have major church-wide impact which call for congregational votes. Also, each congregation sends delegates to represent them at the Annual Conference level.

^[1] <https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions>

2. HOW DID THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH GET TO THIS CRITICAL POINT?

Since its inception, the United Methodist Church has been engaged in debates on the issue of human sexuality. The 2016 General Conference held in Portland, OR, became deadlocked over these issues. The Council of Bishops formed a task group called the Commission on a Way Forward and gave them the job of returning a report to a special session of General Conference, resolving the debate. All leadership agreed to abide by the *Book of Discipline* in the meantime.

Nevertheless, immediately following General Conference 2016 several bishops, Jurisdictional Conferences, and Annual Conferences, defiantly acted to move to ordain LGBT clergy and affirm same-sex weddings. Most notably, the Western Jurisdiction elected a lesbian woman as bishop. Although her ordination as an elder is invalid and her consecration to the episcopacy was declared out of order by the Judicial Council, the Western Jurisdiction refused to reverse their action.^[2] The Council of Bishops as a whole did not take a position in opposition, nor did any other denominational leadership group.

A special General Conference met in 2019 in St. Louis, MO. The Commission on a Way Forward offered three options for the body to choose from as plans for resolving the impasse. They were: 1) *The One Church Plan*, a theologically progressive proposal which would have eliminated all LGBTQ restrictions from the *Book of Discipline*; 2) *The Connectional Conference Plan*, a centrist option which was a complicated reorganization which would allow different regions to make their own theological and organizational choices; and 3) *The Traditional Plan*, a more conservative option which reaffirmed the current *Book of Discipline* and increased accountability for the compliance of denominational leaders. The General Conference voted for *The Traditional Plan* and also added to the *Book of Discipline* (Paragraph 2553) to allow congregations that disagreed to disaffiliate from the denomination. After spending three years, and millions of dollars, to permanently resolve the dispute, the United Methodist Church was back where it started.

In the aftermath of General Conference 2019 more bishops and Annual Conferences took positions and actions condemning the results and stating their refusal to abide by the decision. Seeking a resolution, an ad-hoc group of United Methodist leaders from across the theological spectrum began meeting to seek a solution. With the help of an independent mediator they put forth a resolution which would be presented to General Conference in May 2020. Known as the *Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation*, it would have provided for an amicable division of the United Methodist Church which would have allowed different groups to bless each other and move ahead in their ministry.

The reality of the global COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the delay of General Conference 2020. It was delayed again in 2021 and rescheduled for 2022. In March 2022, the Commission on General Conference, citing on-going COVID-19 concerns, along with difficulties on travel to the United States, once again delayed General Conference until 2024. No attempt was made to reschedule for 2023, nor was any effort

made to provide a virtual/hybrid option online. In the meantime, many global religious groups continued with their 2022 gatherings such as the World Council of Churches, the Anglican Lambeth Conference, and our own UMC United Women in Faith.

^[2] <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/in-re-petition-for-declaratory-decision-from-the-south-central-jurisdiction>

3. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACING THE DENOMINATION?

The continual postponement of General Conference created a backlash, with new affinity groups and denominations, both progressive and traditionalist, organizing to receive disaffiliating congregations and pastors. As a result, the major supporters of the *Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation* have withdrawn their support for the agreement.

In 2022 the Judicial Council ruled that an Annual Conference could not separate from the denomination as a group.^[3] The Judicial Council also ruled that the 2020 General Conference had been postponed, not cancelled, meaning that many traditionalist delegates will not be present, and African members may be under represented because their church growth since 2016 is not included in delegation allocations.^[4]

There has been continued disobedience by denominational leaders. For example, in the Florida Annual Conference there was an attempt by the Board of Ordained Ministry to commission for ministry persons who self-identified as LGBTQ. Prevented from doing so by the body, the Bishop then openly advocated for their commissioning, apologized on behalf of the Annual Conference, and called for a revote at a future date after traditionalists have left the denomination.^[5]

In North Carolina, the Bishop and Conference leadership publicly apologized to a city for establishing a new church that was following the *Book of Discipline* in its ministry and was being served by an appointed pastor, who stood in support of the *Book of Discipline* from a traditionalist position.^[6]

A major shift occurred in November 2022 during all five U.S. Jurisdictional Conferences. Every bishop elected stated their support for changing the *Book of Discipline* regarding LGBTQ issues. The Western Jurisdiction again defied the Judicial Council and the General Conference, and elected as a bishop a self-avowed, married, gay man.^[7]

Additionally, every Jurisdiction, including the Southeastern Jurisdiction, passed the same set of resolutions: 1) calling for a plan which will organizationally disconnect the United States from overseas churches; 2) asking duly elected traditionalist leaders to resign their positions; and 3) endorsing the efforts of queer leaders in the Southeastern Jurisdiction as they work to support and affirm LGBTQ ministry.^{[8][9]}

In 2022 there has been a surge of church disaffiliations.^[10] For example, a third of the churches in the North Alabama and North Carolina Annual Conferences have left the

denomination. In Texas, two Annual Conferences have seen over half of their churches disaffiliate. Other nearby Conferences are expecting comparable results this year. Hundreds of churches in Florida and Western North Carolina are embroiled in lawsuits with their Annual Conferences. Some neighboring large churches which have disaffiliated have been influential in the life of our own congregation including Frazer Memorial Methodist Church, Montgomery, AL; and Christ Church, Memphis, TN.

In response, some bishops and Annual Conferences have taken the approach of encouraging traditionalist churches to leave as soon as possible to remove their influence from the Annual Conference. Others have added extra steps and costs to disaffiliation beyond those required. Some have chosen to suspend the exit of churches altogether.^[11]

All of this means uncertainty for the planned 2024 General Conference. The resolutions and petitions to be voted on will not be known until just before the meeting. Regardless of the decisions made at General Conference, the experience of the last several years indicate that whatever rules are adopted they will not be consistently followed or enforced.

As a result of this constant disruption, many local churches are considering whether they wish to continue to be distracted by the struggle. Many congregations, both progressive and traditional, have determined that the only course of action is to consider the disaffiliation through the *Book of Discipline* ¶2553, provided by the 2019 General Conference.

[3] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/church-court-conferences-cant-exit-unilaterally>

[4] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/church-court-no-new-elections-needed-for-gc2024>

[5] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/clergy-session-vote-highlights-lgbtq-divide>

[6] <https://indyweek.com/culture/north-carolina-conference-of-the-united-methodist-church-issues-apology-re-pioneer-durham/>

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

[8] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/jurisdictions-see-shift-in-bishops-more-cooperation>

[9] <https://apnews.com/article/religion-gay-rights-marriage-1ed8df15ecbb36700cbe638b29dc6617>

[10] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/taking-stock-after-a-season-of-disaffiliations>

[11] <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/north-georgia-hits-pause-on-disaffiliations>

4. WHAT IS DISAFFILIATION?

As other congregations have started their own disaffiliation process from the United Methodist Church many have asked, “Just what is disaffiliation?” At the 2019 called General Conference an exit provision was offered for those churches wishing to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. Referred to as Paragraph ¶2553 in the *Book of Discipline* it allows for a congregation “to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of *the Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference.”^[12]

The main provisions of ¶2553 are: 1) The local church shall pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of apportionments; 2) A disaffiliating local church shall retain its property; 3) The local church shall contribute a pro rata share of any unfunded pension obligations. These are largely payments that a church would make anyway and the church is not “buying the building,” it is a property transfer. The financial implications for our congregation will be provided by the Annual Conference at the Exploratory Meeting on February 12th.

The disaffiliation process is a thorough process with several built in stopping points. Following a congregational discernment time, scheduling a disaffiliation vote requires an Administrative Board vote to request the District Superintendent to call a Church Conference, which is a full congregational vote. In accordance with ¶2553, a vote to disaffiliate would require a two-thirds majority of those members present at the Church Conference in order to pass. There are no provisions for absentee voting. If approved, that decision is then presented to the full Annual Conference for affirmation by simple majority.

Most significantly, this process for disaffiliation expires on December 31, 2023. Bishop Sharma Lewis has stated her intention follow the *Book of Discipline* and continue with the disaffiliation process in use by the Mississippi Annual Conference. She has called a special Annual Conference for December 9, 2023, to deal solely with disaffiliations. In addition, the Conference Board of Trustees has set forth a plan which would extend the provisions of ¶2553 beyond the December 2023 deadline through a provision under the *Book of Discipline*, ¶2549. This involves closing a church and selling back the property.^[13] Therefore there are additional steps required for approval at the District and Annual Conference levels, and there is a risk of a greater cost to the local church.^[14]

Any decision by a congregation to exit is complicated by what is termed the “Trust Clause” which means that the Annual Conference owns the property of a local church and therefore one of these methods must be used for a congregation to obtain ownership of the property in question. Regardless, it is likely that should a congregation chose to exit the denomination after 2023 the process will be more complicated, costlier, and may not even be possible.

Any decision to disaffiliate would also need to be accompanied by a discussion of how the congregation would organize afterwards. In other words, would it become independent, become part of a network of churches, or join another denomination such as the Global Methodist Church or the Free Methodist Church? While the Administrative Board will study those possibilities, it is premature to put forth options at this point.

^[12] <https://cdn.cokesbury.com/images/community/cokesburyportals/2016boderrata.pdf>

^[13] <https://www.mississippi-umc.org/newsdetail/17095916>

^[14] <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-should-united-methodist-congregations-know-about-disaffiliation>

5. WHAT ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY?

Although the deepest challenges facing the United Methodist Church are related to dysfunction and distrust, the debate surrounding human sexuality cannot be ignored. As far back as the 1972 General Conference, and as recently as the 2019 called General Conference, our *Book of Discipline* has remained unchanged regarding these topics. All persons are of sacred worth, made in God's image, and all need the ministry of Church in our struggles for human fulfillment. Furthermore, celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage is the standard for all persons. The *Book of Discipline* defines marriage as "the union of one man and one woman." It also states that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."^[15]

Together, these positions are presented within the United Methodist Church as a balanced approach in line with the Bible and the historic faith of Christianity represented around the world. Nevertheless, there is a widening range of understanding among church leaders regarding the authority and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, as well as a growing diversity of opinion regarding their application within the Church.

In the United Methodist Church there is particular debate on the subject of clergy issues, specifically, the rite of ordination for LGBTQ persons, and the rite of marriage for same-sex couples, neither of which is allowed. There have been instances where these rules have been challenged by the actions of individuals and denominational leaders. Sometimes they have been corrected and others have continued in non-compliance with the *Book of Discipline*. For some, this dispute over full inclusion is a justice issue. For others it is a stand for biblical truth.

This can be an emotional subject and is often personal. You, your family, or your friends, might be part of the LGBTQ community. As sisters and brothers in Christ we should be respectful and willing to listen compassionately. There are real people behind the issues. It is possible to have differing positions still be welcoming and caring toward each other. Your relationship with God through Jesus is important, and this congregation welcomes the opportunity to walk with you in that journey.

^[15] <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-churchs-position-on-homosexuality>

6. HOW DOES ALL OF THIS IMPACT OUR CONGREGATION?

Last summer our congregation held a series of conversations around these issues, meeting with 13 small groups and over 350 people. There was a common expression of a great love for God, a strong bond of love one another as a church family, and joy in the way this congregation demonstrates that love to our community and beyond. Our relationships are strong, we like our congregation, and would like it to stay the same. Unfortunately, events across our denomination are making that difficult.

Since 2019, there has been a significant increase in the number of Mississippi congregations which are exploring disaffiliation. As of February 1, 2023, nearly 100

churches in Mississippi have voted to disaffiliate, with more set to vote before the March 31st deadline. Close to 200 additional churches are in discernment, not all will leave at this time, but there has been a significant shift from small rural congregations to larger county seat and suburban congregations. All of that matters in Mississippi since we are so intricately connected to one another through family and friendships, as well as educational and professional ties.

In recognition of changes yet to come, the Annual Conference already has a committee working on a plan for a reduction in the number of Districts. The Annual Conference budget must also be reduced and the remaining churches will have to cover costs. In October, the Annual Conference released a non-interactive video, which includes views on the future of the denomination, some of which do not align with the current positions of the United Methodist Church. A significant part of the video was devoted to the process by which churches and clergy could disaffiliate from the denomination.^[16]

The immediate impact is great for our congregation. The constant debate has become a distraction to the effective ministry of our congregation, with more conversations among the members and friends of our church. It has become an increasing drain on resources, staff time, and energy. This conflict shifts our focus away from our mission and ministry.

Some have asked about the institutions which we support and hold dear such as Wesley Foundations, Church Camps, the Children's Home, Senior Services, and so on. The Annual Conference has encouraged them to become separately incorporated organizations. Over the years, Conference funding for these ministries has decreased and they have become more financially self-sufficient. They can, and do, receive funding from non-United Methodist churches and individuals. Additionally, the Methodist Foundation of Mississippi had already shifted to allow them to serve those beyond United Methodism. This ensures that funds on deposit are secure under any circumstance.

While Mississippi Bishop Sharma D. Lewis has stated clearly that she will stand with the Bible and the *Book of Discipline*, as did Bishop James E. Swanson, Sr. before her, that has not been the case across the United Methodist Church. The heart of Wesleyan Methodism is the Connection, sharing ministry and holding each other in mutual accountability. Our local church is necessarily, and inevitably, impacted by the actions of other United Methodist churches and leaders.

Part of our denominational Connection involves the payment of mission shares, or apportionments, to support the Starkville District, the Annual Conference, and the General Conference. Currently our congregation faithfully contributes over \$225,000 a year for this purpose. Unfortunately, through our support of Annual Conference giving to the General Church, a portion of our gifts financially sustains some of the bishops and leaders who are intentionally standing in disobedience to the *Book of Discipline*.

^[16] <https://www.mississippi-umc.org/important-connection-conversations-webinar>

7. HOW DOES THIS IMPACT OUR CLERGY?

Starkville First United Methodist Church is blessed with a large number of clergy who have made this place their spiritual home. Some are retired, two are former pastors of this congregation, some are in extension ministries, and some are appointed to serve our congregation. It is worth noting that as clergy, none of them are members of Starkville First United Methodist Church, therefore, they do not have a vote in local church decisions.

With regard to retired clergy, these debates and decisions do not at all affect their vested pension plan. The General Conference Board of Pensions foresaw this circumstance years ago and had already established a separate organization called Wespath to manage the pensions program in preparation for the time when the church would divide.

There are currently two pastors under appointment to our congregation. Our Senior Pastor, Jim Genesse, is an Ordained Elder and Full Member of the Mississippi Annual Conference. Associate Pastor, Charlie Harper, is a licensed Local Pastor on the way to becoming a Commissioned Provisional Member of the Conference. Their clergy status and appointment is independent of the congregational decision. Furthermore, the Bishop is no longer responsible for providing a pastor to any disaffiliated congregation.

^[17] <https://www.wespath.org/about-wespath/wayforwardwespathfaq>

^[18] <https://www.wespath.org/assets/1/7/5857.pdf>

8. WHAT IS NEXT?

Starkville First UMC has not set up a special discernment committee at this time. The elected Administrative Board is leading this process as part of their regular responsibilities. A few additional other church leaders will be consulted from time to time for their professional expertise in pertinent topics. Our congregation, like so many others, is at an important crossroads. There are good reasons to remain within the United Methodist Church and also good reasons to disaffiliate from the denomination. In some ways it might be best to delay any action, in other ways it might be prudent to act more quickly. In order to discern the next steps forward for our congregation accurate information and feedback is needed. To that end there are several opportunities being offered.

On Sunday, Feb. 12th, leaders from the Mississippi Annual Conference will be with us at their suggestion and our invitation. They will share information from the Conference perspective and provide details about the process involved in helping local congregations discern their response. This is a presentation only; no votes will be taken. The meeting will happen in the Sanctuary at 5:00 p.m. In accordance with Conference guidelines, all are welcome to attend but only church members will be active participants.

Our Administrative Board has set up a series of informal Coffee and Conversation gatherings to share information and hear questions. They will be held on Monday, Feb.

13th @ 10:00 a.m., Fellowship Hall; Sunday, Feb. 19th @ 2:00 p.m., Christian Life Center; Thursday, Feb. 23rd @ 6:00 p.m., Fellowship Hall; and Sunday, Mar. 5th @ 2:00 p.m., Connection. The Administrative Board has asked our Lay Leader, Libba Andrews, and Annual Conference Delegate, Gary Windham, to facilitate these gatherings.

It is imperative that our members stay informed. The best way to do so is to attend these meetings, send questions to the email link on the church website, and review the information in the resources provided. The Administrative Board has provided a concise list of websites that represent a range of perspectives and are verifiable sources of information. Be cautious when using social media as it is not always complete or accurate.

In all our conversation let us be respectful and kind, humble and gracious. This church family has awesome people with many different views. Please be in prayer for our congregation and leadership as we move through this discernment process.

These are challenging times for the Church that we love. The reality is that the Church has always faced challenging times. Hold fast to the mission and the promise which Jesus gave us: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).*

For More Information:

Websites

The United Methodist Church	https://www.umc.org/en
United Methodist News Service	https://www.umnews.org
Mississippi Annual Conference	https://www.mississippi-umc.org/
Good News Magazine	https://goodnewsmag.org/
Wesleyan Covenant Association	https://wesleyancovenant.org/

Starkville First UMC Administrative Board Leaders 2023

Libba Andrews, Lay Leader
John Robertson, Administrative Board Chair
Nellah Taylor, Finance Committee Chair
Ken Hood, Staff-Parish Relations Committee Chair
Tim Chamblee, Board of Trustees Chair
Bart Williams, Delegate to Annual Conference
Gary Windham, Delegate to Annual Conference
Dana Franz, Alternate Delegate to Annual Conference

Questions and comments can be emailed to our church at:

umcupdates@first-umc.org