
- What is Discernment?

DISCERNMENT IS THE PROCESS WHEREBY WE ENTER INTO A TIME OF PRAYER AND FASTING TO OBTAIN SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE AND UNDERSTANDING UTILIZING OUR INTELLECT AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.

- Why Discernment ?

WHY ARE CONGREGATIONS CONSIDERING DISAFFILIATION FROM THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH (UMC)?

A denomination is a religious organization that believes the same theology and adheres to the same doctrine. For the United Methodist Church, our denomination is defined and described in the Book of Discipline. The covenant found in the pages and paragraphs of the Book of Discipline sets the boundaries of our theology and beliefs. The Book of Discipline has guided our life together and has united us in making disciples.

Unfortunately, some clergy, bishops, and denominational leaders disagree with some of the theology and doctrine in our Book of Discipline, and they have acted openly and (at times) in direct opposition to portions of our Discipline. In many cases, while there are processes for accountability in the Book of Discipline, the clergy, bishops, and denominational leaders have not been held accountable for breaching the covenant. Also, in many cases, where the bishop of a particular conference disagrees with some of the theology and doctrine found in the Book of Discipline – rather than enforcing the Discipline as they vowed to God to do – they have chosen not to hold clergy/churches accountable. This has caused the denomination to be un-governable as our theology and doctrine may vary from place to place. We have been fortunate that the current bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference has always taken seriously his vow to enforce the Discipline of the church.

Also, the UMC is facing a numerical and financial crisis that will affect and possibly hinder the future ministry of the church. The UMC continues in a downward decline in membership in the United States. Two years after its formation in 1968, the UMC had 10.7

million U.S. members. It now has 6.3 million, an average loss of about 90,000 annually. These declines also impact the financial stability of the UMC, and this instability will be exacerbated with more traditional churches exiting the UMC. There are estimates that the denominational budget may diminish by as much as 40%+ over the next two years. With a much smaller denominational budget, the UMC will see overhead costs along with the cost of bishops and denominational staff comprise a higher percentage of the budget, significantly reducing the amount which supports missions and ministries. In spite of this projected downturn, no plans for restructuring have been announced by the UMC.

We also face the concern that the Alabama-West Florida Conference pipeline of future pastors with the ability to lead a large church such as ours is diminishing. Having a shortfall of strong leadership within the Conference could put our own pastoral leadership stability at risk.

Additionally, the UMC has been in a long-standing debate over the role of Scripture in determining beliefs. Lately, certain issues related to human sexuality have received the most attention. The Book of Discipline does not allow for same sex marriages to be conducted in the church nor ordination of clergy who are “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” This was most recently re-affirmed in the 2019 General Conference of the UMC. While the conflict involving human sexuality normally dominates any public discussion of the challenges currently facing the UMC, the conflict is but a symptom of what is really at issue: as mentioned above, disregard for the Book of Discipline by many bishops and others in leadership positions and a lack of accountability for those who choose to preach and practice the “United Methodist” faith in a manner inconsistent with UMC theology, inconsistent with the Bible and with disregard to The Book of Discipline. Unfortunately, there are some bishops in the UMC that have openly denounced the church law in violation of The Discipline in these areas.

At the 2019 Called Session of the General Conference, a paragraph was added to the Discipline which allows churches to disaffiliate; however, that paragraph will become void

on December 31, 2023. Many churches have entered the discernment process to allow a decision related to disaffiliation prior to that deadline.