

## From the AWFC

### **“Update on Work Post Sunset Clause and Church Property”**

“The plan will outline a fair and equitable way for Alabama-West Florida churches to depart beginning January 1, 2024. Currently any church voting to disaffiliate does so under the guidance of paragraph 2553 in the *Book of Discipline*. That paragraph sunsets on December 31, 2023. The intent of the plan allows churches to wait and see the outcome from legislation adopted at the 2024 General Conference before making any final decisions. This legislation will include Paragraphs 2548 and 2549 from the UMC Book of Discipline. Both paragraphs pertain to church closures. The trustees voted unanimously to continue their practice of allowing churches to keep their property by fulfilling conference liabilities upon departure, absent unique or unusual circumstances, when all other financial obligations are fulfilled by the departing church.”

“This plan is set for the voting members of annual conference to ratify in June of 2023.”

“Too much time has been focused on the sunset date and I (Bishop Graves) am thankful they are providing this necessary clarity.”

“While amenable to the annual conference, the AWF Conference Board of Trustees receives, collects, and holds in trust all real and personal property of the annual conference. Paragraphs 2512.4 and 2553.4 express the intent of General Conference to delegate to the Conference Board of Trustees the exclusive authority in establishing the terms and conditions of a local church’s departure from The United Methodist Church. In Judicial Council rulings 1420 and 1421, the council ruled it is the exclusive right of the

Board of Trustees, with the advice of the cabinet, the treasurer, the benefits officer, the director of connectional ministries, and the chancellor to negotiate terms and conditions for departing churches.”

#### Points to Consider in Trying to Understand this Plan:

1. As of this moment, after Par 2553 sunsets on 12/31/23, there is NO other approved plan for disaffiliation.

The other two paragraphs mentioned in discussions in the So. Georgia Conference where Bishop Graves also presides, are Paragraphs 2548 and 2549.

These two paragraphs will be mentioned in the AWF conference as paragraphs to be utilized by churches wishing to disaffiliate after Par 2553 sunsets.

Both paragraphs concern the closures of churches, not disaffiliation. The plan would be for a church wishing to leave the UMC after 12/31/23, to deed their property to the Annual Conference and then NEGOTIATE a price to buy their property back.

The AWFC Board of Trustees is currently stating that they will “continue their practice of allowing churches to keep their property by fulfilling conference liabilities upon departure” beginning 1/1/24. Currently, the trustees say that an agreement would be in place beforehand and the cost for disaffiliation would be the same as under Par 2553.

We do not have a clear vision as to how this would work. Buying back our property could essentially mean being given a price tag far more than the cost of simply “fulfilling conference liabilities”. There would need to be a solid contract drafted by a lawyer stating a fixed price before this kind of agreement could occur. Under the AWFC current guidelines those liabilities include 2 years of apportionments and our share of the unfunded pension fund.

We also understand that at this time, this ‘extension’ will only be from January 1, 2024, until the beginning of Annual Conference 2024 – a period of less than 6 months!

If a church waits until then to begin the disaffiliation process, they would have approximately 9 weeks to do this. That is an improbable time period to accomplish this!

2. This plan may or may not be ratified, but churches must wait until Annual Conference in June of 2023, to know whether or not it is ratified. Even if it is ratified at conference, there is the great possibility that a “Point of Order” will be called at the vote. This is a procedure that calls into question whether the preceding matter follows the rules. This means the decision could be decided at annual conference. A “Rule of Law” could also be called meaning that the Judicial Council would have to make a ruling on this process. That would further delay the process. And a “Declaratory Decision” could be called for which also calls for the Judicial Council to rule on this procedure. Since the Judicial Council meets infrequently, one can see how this even further delays the process.

Asking churches to wait is a huge risk and gamble of our already limited time. If we were to wait until after the June annual conference to begin the disaffiliation process, we would have

approximately 8 weeks to do so – an impossibility. By then, the only special session left for approval of disaffiliating churches is November 12, 2023. All paperwork must be filed on September 19 for that session.

A VERY important point to consider is the fact that on May 7, 2023, the AWFC special session will vote on and approve the disaffiliation of a large number of churches in this conference. Noticeably leaving the conference are congregations whose members are traditional voting delegates of the Annual Conference as well as our traditional Board of Trustees members. This will lessen the probability of our annual conference even passing this proposal by the bishop of extension.

3. The conference is telling us that we are focusing too much on the sunset deadline. They say churches are asking for more time. Those are false statements. Churches have known that deadline and have been preparing for it. We have plenty of time IF we MOVE FORWARD NOW. Why wait? We have a fair and reasonable way to exit already. And, most importantly, it is GUARANTEED!

The only roadblock comes from pastors and staff who deny the dissemination of accurate information to their congregation. The laity of the churches have recognized this effort to NOT educate and NOT inform ALL of the members with BOTH SIDES of the issue and have diligently worked to circumvent this.

4. According to the above Plan, the AWF Conference Board of Trustees, under paragraphs 2512.4 and 2553.4 of the Book of Discipline, and in Judicial Council rulings 1420 and 1421, has been

delegated the authority in establishing the terms and conditions of a local church's departure from the UMC.

Our conference is using great latitude in citing these paragraphs and rulings as a method to extend Par 2553 which can not be changed until General Conference of May 2024. They are saying that they have been vested with the discretion to make these decisions.

Even IF they somehow find a loophole to make this method work – the BIG QUESTION still remains – WHY WAIT?

Why stay in the UMC longer than we have to and prolong the agony?

We have heard and we have been told repeatedly that THERE IS NO RUSH! BE PATIENT! JUST WAIT! We have been told to take our time and LET THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDE US.

And that is exactly what churches are doing – LETTING THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDE THEM!