

The Future of AUMC and the United Methodist Church

The letter below was written by a member of Auburn United Methodist Church. It expresses the problems and concerns facing AUMC and the UMC. The author wrote it for her friends and has allowed us to use it. Please read the letter carefully and if you have questions or concerns, you can contact the AUMC Moving Forward Committee by email at movingforwardaumc@gmail.com.

I am sure many of you are like me and have heard rumblings of a split within the United Methodist Church, but most have probably not really thought much further than that. Or perhaps some of you have started asking a few questions and are now very confused as to how it relates to our particular church, Auburn United Methodist. The information out there is scattered, complicated, and vague. Clear answers seem to be hard to find, and are often ambiguous. But, I have done my homework. I have researched both sides. I've been to meetings, listened to podcasts, talked with peers and elders, and it is all A LOT. And we're all busy, myself included, yet I've taken this on quite passionately and want to share what I've learned and ultimately why I will vote for disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church when the time arrives.

But first a disclaimer: I am a sinner, so far from perfect it would be embarrassing, yet by God's grace, I am saved. I am a Christian, a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter. I have no theological background from which to offer my opinion other than I feel called to do so. I am making this stand for my children and the future generations to come. With that said, here are my reasons in support of exiting United Methodism (in bold). An elaboration of how I came to these conclusions is in italics below each point.

1. The Methodist church at the corner of Gay and Magnolia has been part of the United Methodist Church since 1968. That is only 54 years of its almost 200-year history. My daughter, my son, my husband, and my husband's father were all born into this church, a legacy that extends longer than the ties to United Methodism. These grounds and

the preservation of this church as we have known it, is, for me, far more important than upholding an ideology that in reality is more of an institution than a testament to the body of Christ.

The United Methodist Church is, as an organization, structured very similar to our own US government, and within the organization, there are bishops, pastors, clergy, etc. that are leftists, centrists, progressives, and traditionalists, much like what we see today within party lines. Obviously, there are a multitude of differing opinions, and unfortunately the opposing sides are pretty much at an impasse on a way forward together. There's tons of information on this (just google) but for simplicity, realize that a reconciliation amongst all is basically impossible.

The Book of Discipline serves as the rule book for the United Methodist Church. It was last modified in 2019 but is scheduled to be revisited at the next General Conference Meeting, which will be held in 2024. It is expected that the more conservative sections of the Discipline will be altered in 2024 to include more inclusive language regarding acceptance of same sex marriage and allowing pronounced homosexual pastors to practice as ordained ministers. Currently though, this is not allowed under the Book of Discipline; however, many pastors and Bishops within the United Methodist Church are ignoring this covenant and openly practicing against the Discipline and there seems to be no recourse for this violation. None have been held accountable, which is frustrating to see that there is no enforcement at the upper organizational levels to hold our beliefs to a higher standard. The current Book of Discipline is not being upheld or enforced thus allowing freedom of thoughts and ideas to permeate congregations without oversight (see point #2 below).

Because of this broken covenant and the realization that the church is moving away from more traditional practices, many conservative pastors and bishops are already leaving United Methodism. This will have a direct effect on the future Book of Discipline and any future modifications as the more traditional voters that have barely won a majority in the past will not be there to vote in 2024. The body of voting members will lose a lot of its

conservative representation, thus ensuring that more progressive ideals will pass. This is why "waiting to see what happens" at the next GC is foolish - we will already be behind the curve.

It is important to also note that the United Methodist body is global and includes countries all around the world. All of these countries will vote on key issues that will directly affect our church in Auburn, Alabama. There's a lot of volatility in the world, a lot of differing opinions and values, and I believe I feel most comfortable being "governed" by a body that truly has Auburn's best interest in mind and understands the wants and needs of the Auburn community, not a worldwide agenda.

2. As the United Methodist organization moves towards taking a more progressive and liberal stance regarding the interpretation of the Bible, long held biblical truths are being re-written to fit modern day social norms. Radical ideas are taking root amongst leading clergy, in our seminaries, and directly into the church body. We as a society, and even our children, especially our children, are bombarded everyday with propaganda encouraging freedom of expression in all forms, promoting self-love over obligation and duty, and hedonistic sexual overtures are at every turn. We see it in the public school system, in society, media, Hollywood, etc., etc. As Christians we are set apart, and that distinction should be upheld in the Bible and in the church. It may not be popular, but the Bible should not be open for debate just to ease the conscience of sinners or for the sake of inclusion. This is true for ALL sin.

This point is where the rubber meets the road - the sticking point. The ultimatum for so many. And it is NOT just about homosexuality, it is about the willingness to bend God's word to mankind's own broken interpretation. As if man knows more than God! Again, this issue is far bigger and far more important than how the church feels about homosexuality. This seems to be the "media" emphasis, but the actual issues are deeper and more complicated.

The website <https://movingforward.cc> is a great place to start to gather information. Here you will find a series of videos explaining the three key issues of division. They are as follows:

1. *Our Differences Surrounding the Bible (my recap below)*

- *Google Adam Hamilton - key United Methodist pastor from Kansas who argues there are three "buckets" for scripture and that not all scripture truly reflects God's will. And he is not alone in thinking the Bible should not be absolute, that it is no longer the best tool to address modern life. There are several out there who feel the Bible is outdated, antiquated, and not reflective of today's times. I do not feel this way. I want my kids to know truth, Biblical truth. I want them to know the Bible as God's word. This should not be an ambiguous concept. We are taught through the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to use scripture, reason, experience, and tradition in order to listen to God and to one another. For me, the message could not be any clearer: scripture is unchanging. The traditions I grew up with reflect the traditions of the Church for the last 2,000 years. The traditions of belief in The Apostles' Creed and our other doctrines provide comfort and a sturdy foundation to weather the storms of societal opinion. Experience, in just my life time, and especially in the past two years, shows us all how quickly our traditions and foundations can be uprooted, and also the fallout that will follow. The new age approach to self-ideology and self-truth is producing a society that is mentally ill, unsatisfied, and unfulfilled. Reason tells me that this is not working. The preservation of the nuclear family with strong ties to God and community is the foundation of a productive and fruitful human race. We NEED a church that upholds these values and that we can turn to in times of confusion and chaos, not a church that jumps on the bandwagon of societal norms to appease popular opinion. This is true across all factions of society. The current spotlight issue is homosexuality, same sex marriage, transgenders, and inclusivity. But these are all just presenting symptoms of the bigger issue. Ask yourself, what will come next, and how quickly will it*

come? Will ideology change again to reflect the new topic du jour? The Bible and its teachings should not be fluid but rather the rock to cling to in the changing tides of popular culture.

2. Our Differences Surrounding Jesus

- *This one is hard for me to comprehend, but there are a growing number of ordained United Methodist ministers interpreting Jesus to not truly be the Son of God, but rather another "way" to God, no different than Mohammed or other religious figures. This and other eccentric ideas are what is being taught at United Methodist Seminaries. The higher education of the church is drifting just as radical as mainstream institutions. Rising future clergy are being indoctrinated to this method of thought and these will be the future leaders of United Methodism. Is this where you want our next appointment to come from? Surely this goes against the Book of Discipline - but violations are not being enforced - will the Book of Discipline eventually be altered enough to include such ideas? And if we remain United Methodist will these ideas be taught in Auburn, Alabama? This, friends, is why it is all SO important!!*

°An aside here on the appointment process – please be aware that under the United Methodist structure, our local pastor is appointed by higher levels in the UMC. The congregation does not get a say in who leads our church but rather the Conference decides the best fit. Current language in the Book of Discipline already calls for the appointment process to be inclusive and creative in order to promote diversity. You can see that the “pathway” is already established, so it is truly a matter of when, not if, these more radical ideas will infiltrate the Auburn UMC Congregation.

3. Our Differences Surrounding Human Sexuality (a byproduct of Difference #1)

- *This is the highlight reel for public discussion, but as I have stated, the real issues are much bigger and far more reaching.*

3. Time is of the essence. Waiting it out to see what happens ensures we do nothing, thereby acquiescing to the system by default. That would be a very costly mistake, both financially and fundamentally. I feel convicted to fight for what I believe, I want to preserve truth for future generations and to do so, we must do it NOW.

The process to disaffiliate is not a quick one. The first step is for the congregation to enter the "Discernment Process", which is an educational process to inform members about what Disaffiliation would mean, how it would work, what are the options if we do or don't disaffiliate, how much it will cost, etc. This needs to happen now. And it is starting to happen at ground level, but it needs to be done church wide. The information, the pros and cons of each side, the hows and whys to this whole situation must be offered up before any official vote can even be considered.

As part of the Discernment Process our Pastor must request a "Town Hall" meeting for our church with our District Superintendent (DS). This is required, and must be scheduled in advance - which might become critical to the timeline as more and more churches pursue this process and the DS must also meet with all of them. We don't want to get caught in a backlog for time with the DS and end up missing key deadlines.

After the Town Hall meeting with the DS, we can then officially hold a vote amongst all members on whether or not to Disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. This is an in-person vote of professed members. There must be a 2/3 majority to carry the vote and a 10-day notice before the vote is required.

Assuming the vote passes, the request to Disaffiliate must still be approved by a series of boards and cabinets and a final approval from our Conference, the Alabama West Florida Conference, must also be obtained. This can only happen at the annual meeting, the next of which is in November 2022. There's no way we can make that meeting, so we would need to get on the May 2023 agenda or last chance, the November 2023

meeting. The November 2022, May 2023, and November 2023 meetings are special called meetings to handle the influx of churches making the disaffiliation request. All preceding disaffiliation approvals must be obtained at least 2 months before the official conference meeting.

WE MUST BE APPROVED TO DISAFFILIATE BY DECEMBER 31, 2023. So really, no later than the November 2023 meeting, meaning we need everything signed, sealed, and delivered in less than one year. Less than one year to go through the entire process outlined above! And this deadline is imperative. As it stands right now, under the current Book of Discipline, there is a specific "off ramp" for churches wishing to disaffiliate. It is called Paragraph 2553, and it is very fair to churches that want to leave. Under the United Methodist umbrella, all of our property is held in "trust", meaning we don't specifically own our church property, but rather the organization as a whole is the true owner. Paragraph 2553 allows for churches that want to leave to be able to acquire their property at the cost of the unfunded pension plan of retired clergy for which they are responsible plus one year of apportionment. That figure for Auburn United Methodist Church is currently at \$1.853 million. After December 31, 2023, it is anticipated that Paragraph 2553 will be removed from the Book of Discipline at the 2024 General Conference. Any exit after that point would mean that churches wishing to disaffiliate would have to purchase their property at FAIR MARKET VALUE. And as anyone should know, our 8 +/- acres in the heart of downtown Auburn is worth far more than \$1.8M - it would be impossible to purchase outright at that point. This is why waiting to see what happens at General Conference 2024 is too late. We cannot count on the current provisions to remain intact - especially given the change in makeup of the voting members that will occur as more and more traditionalists leave the organization (see Point #1 above). The current Book of Discipline allows for an amicable parting but it is not guaranteed to stay that way. In this instance, the old saying "get out while the getting is good" rings very true. The time is now.

And one final point – if nothing is done and we remain United Methodist, key members will undoubtedly leave the church and will take their tithes with them. Significant loss in membership, some of which are likely our highest contributors, will cause our beloved church to fall into dire financial straits. There will be a VERY real risk of default, and if this happens, the church will be taken over by the UMC Trust, probably sold, with the proceeds going to the Alabama West Florida Conference of the UMC and not back to local coffers. Covid and the pandemic was already a tough blow to our membership numbers with worshipers finding other alternatives amidst the closures. A good number of members have already exited because of the issues I just presented. More will leave. The situation our church is in is very precarious and should not be taken lightly. If we do not act, Auburn United Methodist Church and the holy ground on which it stands may not survive regardless of the choice that is made.

That last bit was a little scary, but overall, I hope this has been helpful. It is a lot of information, I know, but I have tried to keep it as simple and as straightforward as possible. I am, of course, no expert. But I do want to share what I've learned and how it has impacted my decision regarding the future of AUMC. The good news though, is that there is a way forward, and there are like-minded people working behind the scenes to ensure that the process begins. This letter is part of that effort.

