

Discernment Update 1/19/23

Helena UMC members,

Your Discernment Team has compiled some helpful information as a result of our recent dialogue sessions and a meeting with Rick Owen, our District Superintendent. There is much to share so read through this and perhaps even save it to read again later.

RECENT SESSIONS - We were very pleased at the number of people who chose to attend the dialogue sessions, and excited that so many people actually attended both of them to hear as many questions and concerns as possible. We are aware that small groups are continuing to discuss issues regarding disaffiliation and to share their thoughts, concerns, and fears with one another. We hope you received the Prayer Guide and that this can comfort and guide you during this time.

At our most recent dialogue session, 3 key questions were asked that are not included in the chart sent out earlier and not necessarily addressed in the video presentations. They were:

1. How will my Sunday morning experience look or feel different if we join one of these new Methodist denominations? The short answer is that we will not sense any difference at all - our order of worship will not change and we will be using the same creeds. Choices of music and robes, etc will continue to be at the discretion of the local church. The cross and flame symbol will be removed from our building and signage since it is a UMC trademark, but the experience inside the building will not change.
2. What about the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism? Will they change? No - these sacraments will remain the same including an open table for all during Holy Communion and the continuation of the practice of infant baptism.
3. What about our involvement in missions? We can continue to partner in missions with anyone we so choose, just as we do now, and that would include any United Methodist groups that we would want to partner with such as UMCOR and Embrace Alabama Kids.

TIMELINE. We are **tentatively** set to hold a **Church Council meeting on February 6** at which time our Discernment Team would make a formal recommendation on whether or not to move forward with a Church Conference to vote regarding disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church. If we do choose to move forward, one **potential date** for the vote is **February 26**. These dates are subject to change and the voting date can not be absolutely locked in until the Church Council votes to proceed. Knowing these dates was an issue of great concern at our recent sessions since people very much want to participate and the only way to do so is to be present in person for the meeting. These voting rules are UMC rules and not subject to be changed by our DS, so we will keep you informed of changes to this date information as it becomes available. Regardless of our specific timeline, if we choose to disaffiliate, the legal paperwork and financial payments would due by May 1 for the Special Called Annual Conference which will be held on May 11 to approve those churches who have chosen to disaffiliate.

FINANCIAL - Our most recent quote from the conference was approximately \$271,000 to be paid if we vote to disaffiliate. This figure is subject to adjustments quarterly and we are currently awaiting our updated number. This includes 2 years of apportionments (anything not paid the year prior plus the year ahead) along with a number calculated by the conference that settles our portion of the unfunded pension liability which ensures retired pastors are able to receive their

expected defined benefit payments. Our conference, unlike some, is not adding any additional property costs or other penalties. Under this plan, we would then be leaving with all rights to keep our property (which presently under that UMC trust clause belongs to them) and continue to pay down our mortgage toward full ownership. This \$271K would need to be raised via special fund giving that would be set up following the vote and would need to be monies given in addition to regular tithes, not instead of them. All normal operational expenses will still be ongoing and must be prioritized. We have received a tax refund of approximately \$162,500 from the IRS under the Employee Retention Credit, a COVID-related policy, and, pending Finance Committee and Church Council approval, this money could be made available to help cover a shortfall in fundraising, if we have voted to disaffiliate. Persons planning to vote for disaffiliation should be in prayer regarding how they will be able to participate in the special fundraiser as the money would need to be paid to the conference by May 1 in order to disaffiliate at the May 11 Special Called Annual Conference.

NEXT STEPS - As you probably know by now, if a Church Conference is held to vote regarding disaffiliation, a supermajority (66.6%) is required in order to leave the UMC. This is a very high bar to reach and some churches do not achieve that. Even so, during the recent sessions, much of the conversation shifted to the question of “And then what? Where do we go?” That will likewise require a congregational vote, typically held immediately after the disaffiliation vote while people are still assembled. This timing is not mandatory and will be discussed with Church Council. There is some belief that people are reluctant to jump off one platform unless they know what platform they are jumping onto - jumping into the unknown is more uncomfortable than jumping into something new but at least known. The team will make a recommendation to Church Council, and if they endorse it, a vote would be taken to move in that direction. This second vote only requires a simple majority and in other churches has typically been falling roughly along the same percentages as the vote to disaffiliate.

With this in mind, if you are still undecided on the issue of disaffiliation, that should be your first priority. Continue to pray and seek out information that will bring clarity. If you did not yet utilize the Ignation Discernment document sent earlier, you can still find it linked on our webpage. This has steps to help guide your thoughts process and help bring things into sharper focus.

If you have already fully given yourself to the discernment phase and come to a place of clarity and believe disaffiliation is the best path forward, then you will need to educate yourself about options moving forward and will find information about this below. If you have determined that remaining with the UMC is the best path, then you may feel you have no further reading/viewing to do but should continue to stay up to date with how our timeline is progressing and key dates for participation.

We should all also be in prayer about ourselves and/or our families as we move forward if the outcome of the vote does not align with our individual preferences. Will you remain a part of this congregation regardless of the outcome? Or will you seek to connect with a different local church body with which you more closely identify? We know there will be shifting, just as there has already been shifting of people in and out of many Methodist churches, including our own, over this issue and others. Our bishop has graciously and sincerely stated on record in a variety

of presentations that we must bless one another during and after this process; what we do matters but how we do it matters too. This is not about winners and losers. This should be about blessing persons as they seek to live in harmony with Christ's call on their lives and to share that good news with others.

So, where to go? We hope you examined the chart sent out in a previous email. It can also be found on our church website, along with all the other material we have provided so far. The team has been primarily focused on studying the Free Methodist Church (FMC) and the Global Methodist Church (GMC). You will find links below where you can view video presentations for each of these, as well as a presentation by Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett, our current bishop, regarding the choice to remain with the UMC. The websites for all 3 of these denominations are included on the linked page as well. The books of doctrines and disciplines for the FMC and the GMC are easy to search to find answers to any specific issues you would like to read about. Both of these options have a leaner organizational structure and a higher expectation of accountability than we are experiencing within the general UMC. The FMC apportionment expectation in our geographic area is currently running about 9%. The Global Methodist will be asking for 2% until they hold their first General Conference (expected in 2024) at which time they will officially discuss, amend, and adopt a Book of Discipline to replace or supplement their current transitional policies. The expectation is that moving forward these would be subject to a 6.5% cap, which includes 1.5% for the church at large, and a range of 1-5% for the local conference as they can determine at their own Annual Conference meetings. (The video for GMC was created prior to the current 2% rule which is in place at this time.) In case you did not already know, the UMC apportionment rate is 10%. The FMC has a trust clause on any new buildings constructed or purchased after a church connects (meaning they technically own that) and the GMC will not have a trust clause so all property, both existing and new, belongs to the local church.

PASTOR - As we have mentioned at all of our sessions, Pastor Rusty has a decision to make that is separate from the decision we make. He has been candid during his own discernment process as he has shared with small groups and in our larger sessions. He knows that he does not plan to remain with the UMC long-term which means he will either retire from the UMC or withdraw from it to connect with another Methodist denomination. The timeline for his decision is not yet finalized. The regular appointment process will be underway soon for the UMC and pastor changes typically happen in July so his fate (and ours if we remain) will be subject to change as is the case every year. If his decision ultimately does line up in any way with ours as this begins to settle, that would be subject to SPRC and the denominational leadership (UMC, GMC, or FMC) to handle and not simply up to our church or Rusty to decide.

LINK - Here is the page referred to earlier about the Free Methodist, Global Methodist, and United Methodist to help you if you are ready to consider next steps. This site is actually from another local church who has concluded their process so scroll down to find the links to videos and websites. <https://www.christchurchbham.com/nextsteps/>

CONTACT - Our church website has a page dedicated to our discernment information. You can get there directly by clicking: <http://umchelena.org/projects/>

We have also established an email address if you would like to submit requests for further information. This is not intended for direct responses but to guide the work of the team and could result in future updates via email or our website. That address is: humcquestions@gmail.com

If you have stuck with this update this far, thank you. There is so much information available and it seems like we have a wide variety of knowledge in our congregation ranging from persons who have engaged in this and finalized their thoughts weeks ago while others have not wanted to think about it and are feeling the weight of all there is to learn. Decision-making is hard, and decisions of this magnitude are even harder which is why we do it with the Lord's help and try to resist the urge to lean on simply our own limited understanding or even the understanding of our friends. May God guide each of us to participate in the plan He has for this precious church we all love.

In His Service,

Your Discernment Team

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