

Questions Regarding the Separation Process

As Presented at the March 26 2023 Church-wide Meeting

Why do we have a task force and whose idea was it?

In September of last year, the pastor and the Church Council Chair began informal conversations regarding the unsettled situation surrounding the SC Conference's decision that Paragraph 2553 was not appropriate for use by SC churches. The pastor and the chair agreed that the Church Council needed more information on the issues being debated in anticipation of action that might be taken at the 2024 General Conference and options that might arise. At its October meeting the Church Council created the GC 2024 task force to gather, organize and present this information to the Council.

Why isn't [the task force] allowed to talk to us about the information they have?

The charge and mission of the task force was to inform the members of the Church Council. All of the information the task force gathered and shared with the Council is publicly available and deemed credible. What the Council is hesitant and prohibited from doing is authorizing or supporting partisan factions seeking to influence opinion in a manner that could be viewed as biased or partisan, favoring one position over another. Such actions by the Council would compromise a discernment process and subject it to rejection by the Annual Conference. The task force was asked by the council not to share information with members of the congregation until they gave the information to the Council. Members of the Council and task force are able and willing to share the factual and credible information we have right now. We have shared most of the information gathered in this information meeting. The guidelines for the GC2024 Task Force were published in The Connection, are in your handout and are posted on the church website.

Why does the Church Council get to decide if we want to leave and not the congregation?

The Church Council and the congregation have different roles in this process. The Council does not decide if First United Methodist Church chooses to leave or stay with the United Methodist Church. The role of the Council is authorized and defined by the South Carolina Annual Conference. The Council is given the responsibility to determine if a local church is going to enter the South Carolina Annual Conference Local Church Discernment Process. The Council is to determine if "it is in the best interest of the church to allow the congregation to pursue separation." If the process goes forward, the congregation votes to either separate or stay at the end of the discernment process.

What time of the year do we vote to remove ourselves from the United Methodist Church?

The process must be completed by March 1 in any calendar year so that it can be reviewed and approved by the Annual Conference in June. There is no sunset provision for this process. If not utilized by a church in one year, it remains available in future years.

There is supposedly no sunset clause for Paragraph 2549, but can't the 2024 General Conference change that?

Paragraph 2549 in the Book of Discipline addresses the closing of a church which cannot continue to operate and is not applicable here. The SC Conference's Local Church Discernment Process is the only avenue currently available to churches in our state and this policy has no sunset or expiration date. Conceivably, the General Conference, meeting in April of 2024, could issue a new "separation policy" that would supersede or replace the current SC Conference policy. That is seen as unlikely as the proposed legislation which was to be presented at the 2020 General Conference, and will be offered at the 2024 conference and had the support of progressives, centrists and traditionalists, provides an essentially "no cost" exit plan for churches.

If a majority of the congregation votes to disaffiliate, the remaining ones will stay at the church building which United Methodist owns. If these remaining ones want to stay with us so the church won't split, can the entire group purchase the church building and pull away from the United Methodist Church?

If a church completes the Local Church Discernment process, holds a properly called Church Conference chaired by the District Superintendent, votes by the required two-thirds majority to leave the United Methodist Church and pays the required "exit costs," the property and assets of the church go to the members withdrawing from the denomination. The church and its members would no longer be identified as United Methodists. In that case, members seeking to remain United Methodists would need to transfer their membership to another United Methodist Church. If the vote fails, the church will remain United Methodist and individual members can decide to stay or transfer their membership to another church. A copy of the Local Church Discernment Process was published previously in The Connection and is available for you today in your handout as well as on the church web site.

Are we starting a discernment process? How do you know what members understand or want without that?

No, the Local Church Discernment Process begins only after the Church Council decides that such a move would be in the best interest of the church and the Council made no such finding. Members of our congregation are encouraged to share your thoughts and concerns with the members of the Council and the pastor. It is important to be aware that while opinions of the members of the congregation have great bearing on many of the Council's decisions, the Local Church Discernment Process specifically states that the Council is to consider only "what is in the best interest of the church."

Will the vote be from the total membership or the members present on voting day?

What percentage of votes are required in order to separate?

Once the Local Church Discernment Process first step of a time of discernment is completed. A church may choose not to continue the process or to move forward with a Called Church Conference. All members of the church must be duly notified and are eligible to attend a vote at the Church Conference. Only the members who attend the Church Conference in person are able to vote. The vote will be to leave the United Methodist Church or to stay with the United Methodist Church. A two-thirds majority vote is required to leave the United Methodist Church.

What would it cost for us to get out of Methodism altogether and keep the property?

What are the properties, accounts, etc. and percentages of each that are required in the separation process?

How much is it going to cost to leave the United Methodist Church?

The decision to separate from the UMC involves many factors. One aspect of the decision is grounded in financial considerations. The Local Church Discernment Process for South Carolina churches provides for an "exit cost" for churches that vote to leave the denomination and seek to terminate the "trust clause" by which the South Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church holds title to the assets of each local church. That total cost has several variables, some of which are still unknown. What is known at this time is:

10% of Value of Church Buildings & Land	Unknown
10% of Value of the Parsonage	Unknown
10% of Value of Church & Parsonage Furnishings	Unknown
10% of Cash & Liquid Assets	\$75,829
Cost of a Commercial Appraisal	2,000
Two Years of Apportionments	52,718
Pension Liability	15,000
Total Estimated Cost	145,547 + 10% of Land, Buildings & Furnishings

If Council decides not to permit the congregation to vote, what is the next step for the congregation?

The Council's decision not to take action was based upon the belief that it was not in the best interest of the church to pursue separation at this time. The Council acted given the limited information and understanding available to it at the time and the limited time frame for action. We all need to continue to be in prayer about this matter, to seek God's guidance and to educate ourselves on these issues. It is essential that you share your concerns with your Church Council members, they are your representatives in church governance. In sharing your concerns, the Council can gauge the level of concern throughout our congregation. There is no need to persuade them of your position, just advise them of the issue causing you concern. It is entirely appropriate for concerned members of the congregation to make their concerns known to the Pastor, Council members or their fellow congregants. It is, however, inappropriate for the church, the Council, or Task Force to support or sponsor groups, forums, discussions, information sessions or meetings at which only one side of the issue is presented. Another consideration for our church is that we are now in a time of transition in pastoral leadership in our church. We will want to seek the new pastor's counsel on how the church can best meet the needs of its members for frank discussions and timely and accurate information on these matters. Our new pastor's first day with us will be July 2, 2023.

If our church leaves the UMC, will there be a United Methodist church in Cheraw that I can go to?

None of the United Methodist Churches in Chesterfield County are leaving the United Methodist Church at this time. Many are waiting to see what happens at the General Conference. The South Carolina Annual Conference is already working to ensure that all United Methodists have a United Methodist church to attend in their area.

What would we be if not Methodist? What would the name of our church be?

If our church would complete the Local Church Discernment Process, we only know that at that point the church would no longer be a United Methodist Church. The church could affiliate with another denomination or remain independent. If the congregation continued to ascribe to Methodist doctrine, it would be free to call itself a Methodist church, though not a United Methodist Church. The direction and choices for the congregation remaining at the church including name, beliefs and structure would be solely at the discretion of those members who remained.

What is the advantage of waiting to decide whether or not we will disassociate from the United Methodist Church?

The first advantage would probably be a better understanding of the reasons for and consequences of separation. We are just beginning that discussion and understanding. The landscape is always changing and the 2024 General Conference in Charlotte will be the first full gathering of this body since 2019. There is a great deal yet to be learned.

Do we even know how the church members feel about this issue?

Certainly not all members. The pandemic held our attention for several years and was the topic of most conversations. As we gather and talk more directly about our concerns for the church, there may be heightened awareness and interest in these matters. As in most groups and as with most issues, there is a broad spectrum of interest in these issues that range from a passionate interest to indifference. As we move forward, respectful and civil discourse is a key to understanding others and their opinions.

What is being done to build consensus and reduce the possibility of splitting the congregation over this issue? We are a small group now and cannot afford to lose members.

Today's meeting is one step in building unity by providing information to the congregation. Pastor Debra will be holding prayer meetings every Wednesday from 5:30 to 5:50 P.M. in the Sanctuary. Praying together for God's will for our church is a great way to build unity. We will also continue to provide information to the congregation. However, it is important to understand that unity and consensus on the issue of homosexuality may not be possible.

Why didn't the group that wants these changes open their own church?

The ideas and opinions of Methodists have always been creative and diverse. Until these ideas have been fully aired and evaluated, the extent of their acceptance is not known. Out of a total of 30,541 United Methodist congregations in the United States, 1,967 have withdrawn from the denomination since 2019...that's a little over 6%. In each of those churches, over 2/3 of the membership felt that they could no longer function as a United Methodist Church under the current policy addressing homosexuality or its enforcement. And as the bishops have indicated, they leave with our blessing that in their new composition they might be able to better accomplish their mission of winning souls for Christ...a "graceful exit."

How could the leaders of the United Methodist Church allow this [fracturing debate] to happen?

United Methodism has always been a big, dynamic tent with lots of ideas and energy. Since the days of John Wesley, we have always vigorously debated ideas and evaluated them through the application of scripture, tradition, experience and reason. And we have been the better for these debates.

Other Issues of Stated Concern Unrelated to Homosexuality or the Church Council Decision on Separation

Several questions addressed issues that were beyond the scope of this meeting, were not researched or reported on by the task force and were not considered by the Church Council in its deliberations over the Local Church Discernment Policy. If there are significant concerns among the congregation regarding these topics, the best source of information is our pastor. Our pastor is willing to answer questions, and when she does not have the answers, to find them for us. However, the Local Church Discernment Process (for churches in SC) and Paragraph 2553 (for churches outside of SC) are the only two procedures available to churches wishing to separate from the denomination and they are available only to churches seeking to separate over the issue of human sexuality and not for other reasons of disagreement.

I am concerned with what is being taught at our seminaries...with pastors and bishops no longer believing in some of our core Christian doctrines. What does the Church Council think about these concerns?

Why is the United Methodist Church taking away The Apostles' Creed?

Some of us have concerns about those in leadership positions who question the deity of Jesus, the virgin birth and that Jesus is the only way to heaven. Has the Church Council discussed this? Will they?

What is the difference between Global Methodists and the way we are now as United Methodists?