

**Comments by Church Council Chair John Wagnon  
offered Sunday morning, September 15, 2024**

Good morning. I'd like to offer a couple of comments and observations about the recent meeting of the Church Council held last week.

As you may know, this past Thursday evening was widely anticipated as the culmination of a three-year effort to begin the exit of this church from the United Methodist denomination. With the Church Council assembled and about 40 interested members in the audience, a motion was offered that would have allowed all the members of this church to vote on making the decision regarding separation following a month-long process known as discernment.

By church law, however, for members of the Council to agree to and support this motion, a motion to proceed with closing a United Methodist Church, they had to stipulate two things: One, that First United Methodist Church of Cheraw was no longer able to pursue its mission and effectively function as a United Methodist Church, and two, that it was in the best interest of the church to allow the congregation to pursue separation.\*\*

Of the twelve other members of the Council present, none felt that they could agree with those assertions and the motion died for lack of a second. It represented near unanimous support for the status quo and the continuing viability of this church and a vigorous rejection of the separation path.

For three years as Chairperson of this Council, I have heard mumblings and hushed accusations of how the United Methodist Church is drifting away from its core values and traditional beliefs, of how there are increasing attacks and eroding support from within for our central theological principals and fundamental doctrine. That's hogwash.

In 1784 John Wesley committed to paper the twenty-five core beliefs of the Methodist faith...statements on the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection, the Virgin birth, salvation only through Jesus Christ. These concepts have persisted, unchanged for the last 240 years and there is no expectation, among reasoned observers, that they will ever change. In the United Methodist Church, the bedrock of our faith is secure.

Churches in the Methodist tradition, and following Wesley's design and wishes, have always been deeply immersed in their communities and active in social causes. The Methodist Church has, since its inception, provided a leadership role in issues of human rights and social justice. We were among the first denominations to oppose slavery, seek reform of child labor laws, support women's suffrage and gender equality, advocate for civil rights and voting rights and accommodation for the handicapped. At the time, these were all controversial positions for the church to take.

And most recently, the United Methodist Church has changed its position on LGBTQ rights, the ordination of clergy and same-sex marriage. Has the Church ever gotten out in front of some of its members, maybe leaned too far forward in its progressive positions, moved too quickly for some? I think that would be the view of many of those members now seeking separation. But the Methodist Church has always taken such positions that some choose to call extreme or radical while others characterize as progressive and open-minded. It should not be a surprise to any because the Methodist Church, throughout its history, has always leaned forward. Our present differences are not over the basic tenets of our faith, but rather the interpretation of scriptural passages and procedural practices instituted within the church.

I understand the disappointment of some. But when our differences are magnified to this degree, there are no winners...we all lose. We now face a new challenge...are we going to allow the differences and disagreements which we have to keep us from pursuing the mission that we continue to share. I'll be glad to meet with anyone, anywhere to further discuss this issue and accommodations that might be made in seeking a path forward. For the sake of this church, what it means to each of us and what it means to this community, I hope and pray we can find that way forward, together.

\*\* Motion provided to Council members on September 9 and voted upon by the Council on September 12:

***“Having determined that Cheraw First United Methodist Church is no longer able to pursue its mission and effectively function as a United Methodist Church, the Church Council of FUMC finds that it is in the best interest of the church to allow its members to pursue separation from the denomination and asks the District Superintendent to set a date for a Church Conference for this purpose no later than March 1.”***