“Discontinuation” and “abandonment” under ¶ 2548 of The 2000 Book of Discipline are the Church’s official processes for closing or removing a local church as a charge. Discontinuation or abandonment of a local United Methodist church in many ways are task-oriented procedures (with detailed “to dos”), and as such are suited to a checklist like this. What should not be lost in the tasks are the many spiritual and pastoral aspects of closing a local church: honoring the rich history of the church, attending to the grief and other pastoral needs of persons who still worship there, listening to persons who have thoughts and ideas about what should happen to the property, and the like. These spiritual and pastoral aspects of closing a church cannot be captured in a checklist, because they are uniquely different in every situation. As you work your way through the tasks, take enough time to stop and observe, listen and discern the special needs of the people around you who are affected by the process.

NAME OF CHURCH: __________________________________________________________________________

ADDRESS: ________________________________________________________________________________

DISTRICT: ________________________________________________________________________________

LOCAL CHURCH CONTACT PERSON: ____________________________________________________________

NAME: ____________________________________________________________________________________

ADDRESS: ________________________________________________________________________________

PHONE/FAX: _______________________________________________________________________________

E-MAIL: ___________________________________________________________________________________

I. Discussion and Evaluation of Potential Recommendation

___ For Discontinuance – Cabinet, district superintendent, conference board of trustees, pastor, local church members or other groups to discuss and evaluate discontinuance issues, with sensitivity to the church’s history, culture, fears, feelings of loss and grief, and other feelings. Take time to listen and truly hear the stories of the persons who will be affected by a potential major change in their church lives.
II. Assessment of Potential (¶ 2548.2)

Prior to a recommendation of discontinuance, the district superintendent, in consultation with the appropriate agency assigned the responsibility of the conference parish and community development, shall guide the congregation in assessment of its potential as outlined in ¶ 213. (See Exhibit A, a sample letter to the congregation that discusses issues for a voluntary discontinuance).

III. Obtain Legal Counsel (¶ 2548.1)

The district superintendent should obtain and consider an opinion of legal counsel as to the existence of any reversion, possibility of reverter, right of reacquisition or similar restrictions to the benefit of any party. A reversionary interest may defeat the right to sell the church property.

IV. Recommendation of Membership Transfer, Future Use and Disposition of Assets (¶ 2548.2)

The recommendation of the district superintendent must include:

[1] Transfer of membership (¶ 228)
[2] Future use of all real, personal, tangible and intangible property (¶ 2548.2)

The district superintendent needs to consult with the local church in regards to their thoughts on the appropriate place(s) for transfer of members and the disposition and transfer of the real property and personal property of the church.

V. Consent to Recommendation (¶ 2548.2a)

The district superintendent makes a recommendation of discontinuance and consent must be received from:

[1] The presiding bishop
[2] The majority of the district superintendents
[3] The District Board of Church Location and Building.
VI. Discontinuance by Annual Conference (¶ 2548.2)

___Superintendents will be asked to present to the annual conference any resolution for a local church(es) to be declared abandoned and/or discontinued. See Exhibit B.

___Consider the appropriateness of some ceremony of recognition at annual conference including members of the discontinued churches.

___The annual conference votes on the discontinuance and abandonment and recommendations for use of property

___Make copies of action and supply to:

___[1] Conference secretary
___[2] Conference Board of Trustees

___Appropriate notification to local church

___Attention to healing issues with members of the discontinued church, with sensitivity to the church’s history, culture, fears and feelings of loss and grief.

VII. Title to Real Property (Transfer within the connection to another United Methodist organization)

[Obtain a copy of the current deeds and legal descriptions]

___The title [deed] of the property shall be transferred to: ____________________________

NOTE: It is recommended that the conference chancellor be consulted in relation to preparation of a deed. All deeds to United Methodist entities must include the trust clause (¶ 2503.5). It is further recommended that if the transfer is to another United Methodist entity, a title policy be obtained showing good title in the new entity.
VIII. Maintenance of Property Insurance

___[1] Make sure property and liability insurance is maintained on the property. Have someone assigned to check the property regularly if not occupied. Change post office mailing address and give neighbors and police a contact person for emergencies.

___[2] Local church trustees and/or annual conference trustees to provide for ongoing maintenance of property during transition (e.g., utilities, repairs, lawn service, snow removal, etc.)

___[3] Develop or ensure viable plan for paying bills

IX. Sale of Property (To Third Party)

If property is sold, an appraisal should be obtained to aid in determining a fair sale price. It may be easiest to have the cooperating local church board of trustees deed the property directly to the new buyer. The superintendent must agree to any such sale.

___[1] Sale price established by conference action or as delegated to the Conference Trustees.

___[a] Sanctuary $________

___[b] Parsonage $________

___[c] Contents $________

___[d] Other $________

___[2] Disposition of proceeds determined by annual conference resolution or conference trustees in keeping with annual conference policy.

___[3] Removal by conference trustees, insofar as reasonably possible, of all Christian and church insignia and symbols from such property. § 2548.3

___[4] Instructions or Restrictions: As determined by the bishop, cabinet, conference trustees: ____________________________________________________________

X. Transfer of Personal Property

___ There should be an inventory and a checklist of any and all personal property that

1 If the conference trustees are taking immediate action on sale, they “should give first option to other denominations represented in the Commission on Pan-Methodist Cooperation.” (African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) A letter to the appropriate local representatives would be appropriate. § 2548.3

2 The GCFA legal department has a Checklist for sale of property that outlines the necessary Disciplinary steps. (Click here for the Checklist for sale of property.)
is being transferred to another United Methodist organization or donated without any consideration. **NOTE:** When appropriate, local church trustees may endeavor to return items to families who have donated them to the church or allow long-time members to obtain emotionally significant keepsakes from this church. (Bibles, hymnals, etc.)

**XI. Instructions Pertaining to:**

**Commission on Archives and History of the Annual Conference**

___¶ 2548.4 All deeds, records, and other official and legal papers, including the contents of the cornerstone, of a church that is declared to be abandoned or otherwise discontinued shall be collected by the district superintendent and deposited for permanent safekeeping with the conference commission on archives and history.

**Gifts, Endowments and Foundations**

___¶ 2548.5 All gifts held in trust and assets of any endowment funds or foundation shall be reviewed. The property passes as directed by the annual conference or the conference trustees, unless restricted by the terms of the gift or operation of law.

___¶ 2548.6 Any gift, legacy, devise, annuity, or other benefit to a pastoral charge or local church that accrues or becomes available after the charge or church has been discontinued or abandoned shall become the property of the trustees of the annual conference within whose jurisdiction the discontinued or abandoned church was located.

**XII. Additional Recommendation and Actions:**

___[1] At the time of discontinuation, the district superintendent provides the pastor with the current year Statistical and Financial Report forms to be completed and sent to the conference treasurer for inclusion in the Conference Journal.

**TABLE I — Membership Statistics**  
**TABLE II — Financial Statistics**

___[2] For a discontinuance, where possible, it is helpful to leave the local church board of trustees intact for the time period needed to sell and/or dispose of the property as the annual conference directs.

___[3] DS collect all keys, if local church trustees are not kept intact to dispose of property. [May want to change the locks on the church.]

___[4] Make inventory of all property at closing.

___[5] Take pictures of inside (include furnishings), outside of church, and put in the church file (especially items of value).
___[6] Make arrangements to receive balance in all accounts:

___[a] General Account
___[b] Sunday School Account
___[c] Memorial Funds
___[d] United Methodist Women
___[e] Other:

___[7] Ongoing Care: At some point in time after the discontinuance (perhaps a year), consider how transferred members may be contacted/cared for.

___[8] When appropriate and no sale of the property is desirable or possible, consider having the sanctuary to be used as a chapel. Local families may be charged with upkeep. Previous members and their families could use the church for special occasions and events.

___[9] If the discontinued church is associated with a cemetery, columbarium or memorial garden, consider in consultation with the families in the church:

(a) Deeding the church to a local cemetery association that consists of family members of those buried there
(b) See if a commercial cemetery association will take over
(c) Deeding to a church where members are transferred

___[10] See Exhibit A for a letter from the DS to a church agreeing to discontinuance.

___[11] If the church is highly conflicted or upset about the discontinuance, consider conflict resolution processes that might be helpful to engage the conflict. Call JUSTPEACE for assistance with conflict resolution (847-425-6526). Do not avoid the conflict – it will not go away on its own!

Disclaimer: GCFA is not engaged in providing legal advice, and the conference chancellor or other legal advisor should be consulted before making decisions or taking action.
Exhibit A

SAMPLE LETTER TO A LOCAL CHURCH
(For a Voluntary Church Closing)

I am writing in response to Rev.___________’s phone call on ___________ informing me that the members of _________________United Methodist Church have decided that it would be in the best interests of all to close the church and transfer their memberships to (Other) United Methodist Church.

First, let me say that I know such a decision comes only after much evaluation of our current status and future potential and in thanksgiving for all the church has meant to so many disciples of Jesus Christ over the many years of its history. Having worked with the loving and gracious members of__________United Methodist Church, I know that you are also grieving the loss of something precious to all of you. However, I want to commend you for your decision. It is a decision of good stewardship, genuine knowledge of what a church is to be, and a real concern for vital discipleship. By making this decision you have witnessed to your faith in a God who is not restricted to one building or one community and in a God who reigns through changing times and demographics. Thank you for reminding all of us that good stewardship is not clinging to the past but moving into the future with faith and assurance. We are blessed by your strong witness.

The process for closing a church is found in the “Church Property” section of The Book of Discipline, particularly in ¶2548. Please don’t let the titles used upset you: Discontinuation and Abandonment are terms used to describe the state of the church that is closed, not necessarily the intent of those who close it. Based upon this section, here are the steps we need to take together:

1. Please decide the date on which you want to close the church and let me know. The decision will be made by a church conference for ________________United Methodist Church.

2. I will engage a lawyer to research your deed and provide a legal opinion as to any reversion restrictions on your property as required by The Discipline. (In your case, we will need to be certain that the deed is complete for all of your property.) Please send to my office the legal description and information (book and page number) where your deeds may be found in the County offices.

3. Plan to have a special worship service as the official closing of the church. This might include a remembering of the major events in the life of the church, a presentation of a history of the church, and thanksgiving for all who have given life to the church. There is an order in the Book of Worship for the leave-taking of a church building and the disbanding of a congregation (pp. 648-650). This could provide a guide for the service and some liturgy and prayers. There are other worship resources that will also be helpful, but the most meaningful service will be the one that the members plan together.

4. Plan with your district superintendent and the conference board of trustees how best to care for all the symbols of the Christian faith: crosses, communion service, baptismal font, and other symbols.
5. Recommend who will care for the properties and funds (endowments, cemetery funds, upkeep funds, etc.) of___________United Methodist Church. There are two choices: Charge trustees who are elected by the Charge Conference or transfer of the property to the trustees of the annual conference.

6. Charge trustees (¶ 2527) would be responsible for maintaining the funds for upkeep of the building and grounds so that they do not become unsafe or unkempt. They could also recommend to sell or lease the property on behalf of the charge. There would be at least three charge trustees and they would be expected to report annually to the charge conference on the status of the property and any funds held in trust. This would be true if you choose Limited Service status for a few years: this should be for no more than five years or so.

7. The Board of Trustees (¶ 2512) of the annual conference would receive the property and determine what would be the best stewardship of it for the good of the annual conference. When church properties are “abandoned” or left on one to care for them, the conference trustees must either provide care or sell the properties. When the properties are sold the money received is used to build new churches so that the resources God has given to _________ United Methodist Church continue to be used to the glory of God.

8. If no decision is made, the property returns to the annual conference board of trustees (¶ 2503) because all property is held in trust for the annual conference.

9. The final decision on the closing of the church and disposition of the property will be made by the 2001 session of the _________________Annual Conference.

10. The new church that receives a large number of transferred members should plan an official welcome.

I hope this list is helpful to your process. May God’s rich blessings be especially clear to you as you journey through this ending to a new beginning. Please let me know if I can be of any further help.

Thanks to Rev. Susan Keiran Kester (district superintendent) for sharing a letter which we have used as a basis for this sample.

Note: This is a sample letter. Each situation is unique, and other issues may need to be addressed that are not covered by this letter. GCFA is not engaged in providing legal advice, and the conference chancellor or other legal advisor should be consulted before making decisions or taking action.
Exhibit B

SAMPLE

PROPERTY MATTER – RESOLUTION FOR DISCONTINUANCE OF
____________ UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

WHEREAS the ____________ United Methodist Church located in _______County was founded in __________ and has had a long and proud history (optional); and

WHEREAS the charge conference of the ____________ United Methodist Church voted on _________________ to discontinue the church (optional); and

WHEREAS the district superintendent has recommended discontinuance of __________ United Methodist Church and transfer of membership to _________United Methodist Church; and

WHEREAS the superintendent has recommended that the property be (sold or transferred) and [if sold] the sale proceeds be paid to ___________________________; and

WHEREAS the consent to discontinue has been granted by the presiding bishop, a majority of the district superintendents, and the district board of church location and building and all proper Disciplinary requirements have been complied with;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the ____________United Methodist Church be discontinued effective ______________ and that the property shall be transferred to____________________ (or proceeds paid to_______________).