

# University United Methodist Church Denominational Discernment FAQ's

- 1. Why is University entering into a discernment period to determine whether to hold a vote to disaffiliate from the United Methodist denomination?**
  - a. As part of the 2019 Special Session, a clause (§2553) was added to the United Methodist Book of Discipline that allows churches to leave the denomination with their property. This clause expires at the end of 2023. Under §2553, a decision to disaffiliate must be finalized prior to the Rio Texas Annual Conference in June 2023.
  - b. Discernment is an official title designated by the Rio Texas Conference to describe the process a church must undertake to consider disaffiliation. There is a required 6-month discernment period before a congregation may vote on disaffiliation. A decision would be required by June of 2023 to be able to leave the denomination by December 2023 under §2553. Because a church has chosen to start this process does not mean they have already decided to hold a vote on disaffiliation.
  - c. University has chosen to enter into a period of discernment because it provides the greatest opportunity and flexibility to evaluate our options and have the ability to disaffiliate by December 2023 within the current process (§2553) should it become clear that this is the best option for University to continue to pursue the mission and ministry to which God has called us.
  - d. The future of the United Methodist Church is uncertain and has proven volatile. The Discernment Committee remains firmly committed to focusing on University's core values and identity as we seek to understand the options and what is the best way for University to continue being the congregation it has always been.
- 2. The Book of Discipline has not changed so why are churches disaffiliating?**
  - a. The delegates to the Special Session of the 2019 UMC General Conference passed legislation that allows congregations to disaffiliate from the denomination. This "graceful exit" provision expires on December 31, 2023. The expectation for this clause was for it to be used by progressive churches to disaffiliate after the General Conference upheld the existing language in the Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality.
  - b. The expectation in 2019 was for a clear path to be created by the General Conference in 2020. This General Conference did not meet as planned due to Covid-19 and the 2022 meeting was cancelled. The next General Conference will not occur until 2024 after the current path for disaffiliation (§2553) expires.
  - c. Given a lack of clarity, consistency, and repeated delays by the United Methodist Church General Conference, individual United Methodist congregations find themselves having to make a choice about their denominational affiliation without knowing what the General Conference may

do in the future. Many churches are considering disaffiliation as a means for their congregation to have a clearer and more predictable future.

- d. There is a high degree of distrust due to the disaffiliation process not having been applied consistently across conferences and churches.
- e. The United Methodist Council of Bishops has not been enforcing provisions of the Book of Discipline throughout the denomination allowing for a wide disparity of teachings and actions.
- f. As of December 2022, roughly 2,300 United Methodist congregations have disaffiliated from the United Methodist denomination.

### **3. What is the process to disaffiliate from the UMC in the Rio Texas Conference?**

- a. The 2019 General Conference created a Disaffiliation Agreement that is codified in the Book of Discipline ¶2553. Consistent with that agreement, the Rio Texas Conference has laid out a specific disaffiliation process for each church in the conference that may want to consider separation.
- b. The Rio Texas Conference disaffiliation process has four components:
  - i) File a letter with the District Superintendent expressing intent to enter into a 6-month period of discernment.
  - ii) Conduct a congregational vote to disaffiliate. Disaffiliation would require a 2/3 majority. For University, our vote will be held on May 21, 2023.
  - iii) Formalize disaffiliation by acceptance at the conference level at the Rio Texas Annual Conference (June 2023).
  - iv) Meet the financial requirements of disaffiliation.
    - Payment of the current 12-month apportionments in full
    - Payment of the future year apportionments
    - Payment of the value of the unfunded pension liability estimates

### **4. What are the current pros and cons for University on whether or not to disaffiliate from the UMC?**

- a. Pros for disaffiliation under ¶2553
  - i) Allows the church a "graceful exit" and to leave with their property and assets. The "graceful exit" period will expire December 31, 2023. ¶2553 also provides a clear path of exit. The requirements for future disaffiliations would be determined by General Conference 2024. Rio Texas and Bishop Schnase are making efforts to extend the guidelines of ¶2553 through December 31, 2024, through other disciplinary paragraphs.
  - ii) Allows University greater control and responsibility for achieving the mission that God has set forth for this congregation free from on-going disagreements within the United Methodist Church
  - iii) Allows exit from an organizational structure that is fraught with issues and differences over theology, scriptural authority, financial management, and accountability. The current state of the denomination is damaging the witness of the church.
  - iv) Ensures church control over its clergy positions and how it chooses to invest its financial resources without apportionment liabilities.
  - v) Disaffiliation does not require immediate action to affiliate with another denomination. It is conceivable University could choose to remain

independent for a period prior to choosing the best opportunity for denominational affiliation. It is also conceivable it could reaffiliate with the United Methodist denomination should the denomination reach a place where it became a coherent and effective foundation for University to fulfill its mission and purpose.

- b. Cons for disaffiliation under ¶2553
  - i) The Methodist system in its intended function provides stability for congregations. It is intended to support clergy in both spiritual and temporal ways. It is also intended to provide oversight, clarity, and accountability to the United Methodist Book of Discipline. The itinerant system provides pastoral appointments to local churches.
  - ii) The issue of human sexuality will cause hurt feelings and could cause division within membership. Some may feel disaffiliation is a statement that there are people who are not welcomed or loved within our congregation.
  - iii) Disaffiliation may strain or break historic and legacy relationships between clergy, congregations and individuals. Many of us are formed deeply in the United Methodist Connection.
  - iv) Bishop Schnase, the current Bishop of Rio Texas Conference, is hopeful the General Conference 2024 will find a way to allow for “graceful exists” past the December 31, 2023, deadline specified in the Book of Discipline and is proposing ¶2549 as a vehicle for extending the provisions of ¶2553 through 2024.

**5. Who gets to make the decision for University to disaffiliate with the UMC, and when would that happen?**

- a. Following approval from the Administrative Board, members of University would have the opportunity to participate in a called Church Conference for the purpose of voting whether to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church. An affirmative 2/3 vote of members in attendance at the church conference is necessary for University to approve disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church.
- b. The University Church Conference decision would need to be finalized prior to the Rio Texas Annual Conference in June 2023. The conference has discussed holding a late 2023 Annual Conference to give more time for discernment, but this has not been made official. There is a called session of Annual Conference scheduled for May 6<sup>th</sup> to process disaffiliating churches.

**6. Why does University have to make an affiliation decision by June 2023? Can't we wait to see how things play out? Is there any deadline for making a disaffiliation decision?**

- a. The Disaffiliation Agreement made at the 2019 General Conference is codified in ¶2553 of the Book of Discipline. The provisions of ¶2553 expire on December 31, 2023. Under ¶2553, a decision to disaffiliate must be finalized prior to the Rio Texas Annual Conference in June 2023 to meet the December 31, 2023, deadline.

- b. The Rio Texas Conference issued a document titled “Discerning Pathways: Guidelines for Disaffiliation under ¶2553” that states, “Since ¶2553 is no longer valid after December 31, 2023, disaffiliations after that date will be handled under ¶2549” using the ¶2553 process.” However, since the initial posting of these guidelines, the Rio Texas Conference has had to rescind this provision (¶2549) due to a UMC Judicial Council ruling prohibiting this path to disaffiliation. This means that once ¶2553 expires, churches may not be able to leave easily with their property and assets. Bishop Schnase and Rio Texas Annual Conference have publicly committed to and argued for the use of ¶2549 as a vehicle to extend the provisions of ¶2553 through 2024. We appreciate the conference and the Bishop's efforts to allow more discernment time for congregations but must note that this pathway is not certain and is subject to Judicial Council review.
- c. The General Conference has been consumed by the issue of human sexuality and gender for many years and has been unable to create a clear and effective process and solution that would allow the local church to move on and be free to continue its mission and ministry. Based on General Conference history, it is difficult to expect a clear and mutually beneficial process to come from General Conference 2024. There will always be a way to disaffiliate; however, it is unknown what the process will be in the future and what the financial consequences may be after ¶2553 expires.

**7. What are the costs associated with disaffiliation, e.g., apportionments, unfunded pension liability estimates? When would those payments be due?**

- a. This is a difficult question to answer as the financial requirements have been a moving target. There are guidelines, but those have been in flux. Roughly the formula is the apportionments 12 months prior (by calendar we believe) to disaffiliation and the 12 months post disaffiliation combined with what the connection is calling the unfunded liability payment (this number moves with interest rates and market realities).
- b. In the event of disaffiliation, ¶2553 states that University would be asked to pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months immediately prior to the disaffiliation date, an additional 12 months of apportionments, and University's pro rata share of the Rio Texas Conference's unfunded pension liability. The unfunded pension requirement has been challenging to understand, the pension plans are and have been funded. The request is for potential future funding requirements of United Methodist Church—that is the liability of being the institution that has these pension funds into an uncertain future. Annual conferences receiving disaffiliating payments are not required to place these moneys in pension funds or even pension reserves. The Rio Texas plan is to place disaffiliating payments in the Rio Texas Board of Pensions, a separately incorporated entity within Rio Texas fiduciary structure.

**8. How would University's property be affected by disaffiliation?**

- a. The Book of Discipline has a Trust Clause (¶ 2501) which states that all properties held by the local church are actually held in trust for the entire

denomination. This has created concern and uncertainty that a church could lose its property upon disaffiliation.

- b. The current mechanism created for disaffiliation (§2553) ensures that in the event of disaffiliation, the local church would receive full ownership of its property and assets.

**9. How would University's Foundation be affected by disaffiliation?**

- a. University's Foundation is a separate 501(c)(3) legal entity that is directly connected with University regardless of denominational affiliation.

**10. What will happen to University's pastoral staff when the decision is made to either remain or disaffiliate with the UMC?**

- a. Each pastor will have the ability to make an individual decision on whether to retain their status as an elder within the United Methodist Church or to disaffiliate themselves.
- b. If a clergy chose to remain with the United Methodist Church despite their current congregation's disaffiliation, the Rio Texas Conference Bishop (currently Bishop Schnase) will retain the authority to reassign all conference elders to new congregations still a part of the United Methodist Church at that time.
- c. If a clergy chooses to disaffiliate, they would no longer be a part of the United Methodist appointment system nor under the United Methodist authority to determine where they will serve.
- d. Alternatively, University could potentially offer United Methodist pastors a "visiting pastor" assignment to remain with University if it were to disaffiliate. This would require the approval of the United Methodist Church. There are many clergy positions that are filled by pastors across denominational lines on a situational basis.
- e. The Rio Texas discerning pathways document stipulates exiting congregations support existing clergy until the end of the conference appointive year (July 1). University SPR and leadership hope and plan to be able to support and keep UMC remaining clergy who wish to continue serving at University for far longer if possible and appropriate.

**11. What happens to clergy pensions should a clergy choose to disaffiliate?**

- a. Clergy would retain rights to all pension benefits accumulated to date.
- b. Appointed clergy who choose to disaffiliate would still hold the accrued value and be able to choose to keep the account with Wespath (the current pension administrator) or move it to a different retirement vehicle. The University staff retirement plan is not controlled by the United Methodist Church and would remain unchanged by disaffiliation.

**12. Human sexuality is referred to as the "presenting issue" regarding the dispute over language in the UMC Book of Discipline and denominational affiliation. What does this mean and are there other factors at work?**

- a. The provisions for disaffiliation described in this document under §2553 are limited to the "presenting issue" of human sexuality (eligibility of LGBTQIA+ persons for ordination and marriage in the church). There are other related, non-presenting issues such as governance, institutional overhead,

ecclesiastical disobedience, financial management, use of apportionments and primacy of scripture that have created the situation in which we find ourselves.

- b. It is impossible to separate the challenges that the United Methodist denomination has had with its structure and management of the challenges brought forth because of the presenting issue of human sexuality. The inconsistent management of and inability for the church to lead through and past the issue has caused it to overshadow the mission and purpose of the church. There has not been a clear and unified understanding and application of discipline. This has created widespread distrust and uncertainty within the denomination.

**13. If University disaffiliates from the UMC, when and how will it affiliate with another denomination?**

- a. The first decision is whether to remain affiliated with or to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church.
- b. If University were to choose to disaffiliate, the church would become independent while it underwent a second discernment period to determine a firm foundation/affiliation to continue its mission and ministry.
- c. The choice of where to reaffiliate has happened on different timelines for different congregations. University has great appreciation for the connectional aspects and its Wesleyan tradition; however, it is too soon to determine a specific affiliation pathway in the event of disaffiliation. The choice of where to affiliate will need to be a discernment process in and of itself. The Global Methodist Church has received the most attention and many churches are choosing to affiliate there, but there are many other options. The reality is we would need more time to understand the options as they are continuing to develop and form. In addition, should we decide to disaffiliate, this could also provide time to understand the future direction and changes within the United Methodist Church and if there were an opportunity to reaffiliate.

**14. Everyone is welcome at the University. How can we be considering disaffiliating?**

- a. University has always been, currently remains firmly committed to and always will be welcoming and loving to ALL people. This is non-negotiable and core to our DNA.
- b. While the presenting issue is human sexuality, it is not the foundational problem. The presenting issue of human sexuality is what has brought the other governing issues to the forefront. The inconsistencies and mismanagement by the United Methodist Church continue to damage its witness.
- c. The United Methodist Church has been consumed by infighting surrounding the issue of human sexuality for many years. The polity (structure) of the denomination has not been able to generate any progress surrounding the issue that would allow the denomination to move beyond it in a way that it can return to its true mission and purpose.

### **15. What will change if University leaves the UMC?**

- a. Very little would change upon disaffiliation. The expectation is that a member or guest to University would have the exact same experience in worship and programming. University will continue to adhere to the existing United Methodist doctrine. University longs to continue to pursue the same mission and call that God has placed upon us to build bridges to Christ and our community with compassion by loving, welcoming, and serving all people.
- b. Following disaffiliation, there would no longer be an apportionment obligation for University (\$487,000 annually). If University chose to affiliate with another organization, financial obligations would need to be established.
- c. The Leadership Council and the Administrative Board would need to navigate maintaining our tax exemption status and health insurance provision for clergy previously coordinated by the Conference. In addition, the Leadership Council would generate a system of oversight of Pastor Ben Trammell and provide the governance and policies of University.
- d. We would no longer use the United Methodist Church name and cross and flame logo.
- e. Future pastors would no longer be assigned by the Rio Texas Bishop. University would have independent authority in filling any clergy needs should its complete team of clergy not choose to also disaffiliate.
- f. Pastor Ben Trammell has declared his desire to help lead our church wherever University is called to be. His ultimate desire is to work for the mission of the church and would be honored for that to continue to be at University.

### **16. What will change if University does not leave the United Methodist Church?**

- a. Very little would change if University chooses to remain in the United Methodist Church. However, it is expected that due to continued pressure and large number of exits from the denomination that the United Methodist Book of Discipline will likely be changed to embrace a modified theology regarding human sexuality.
- b. Bishop Schnase, the current Rio Texas Conference Bishop, has said that individual churches and pastors would not be forced to accept practicing same sex clergy or perform same sex marriages against their will during his leadership of the Rio Texas Conference. His remaining time with the conference as Bishop is uncertain but most likely 1 or 5 more years.
- c. Pastor Ben Trammell has declared his desire to help lead our church wherever University is called to be. His ultimate desire is to work for the mission of the church and would be honored for that to continue to be at University.
- d. Due to the ongoing instability within the denomination, it is unclear what other changes might occur.

### **17. Where can I find more information?**

- a. Please view the videos that are available from our clergy on our website and app. It is anticipated that more information will continue to be added and updated.

- b. If any groups of Sunday school classes would like to schedule a time with Pastor Trammell to be present with them to answer any questions or help them through this process, please contact Ruth Towers.
- c. Please stay connected with us! The University Discernment Group has an open link on the website for you to submit any specific questions that you have as well.
- d. The Rio Texas Conference Website has links to resources (We are UMC – Rio Texas Annual Conference).
- e. There are numerous other resources online from other churches, organizations, and individuals. It is important to remember resources come with bias. It is usually easy to detect a particular angle or desired outcome a resource carries and is important to understand the situation wholistically.