

Discerning a Way Forward for St. Paul's United Methodist Church

March 14, 2019

Prepared by Marge Higgins, Lay Leader

On Sunday, March 3, the congregation of St. Paul's gathered for an update on decisions made at the special global General Conference of The United Methodist Church (UMC), which ended February 26, and an overview of our plan to move toward our own decisions about the future of St. Paul's.

There are many questions that can't be answered yet; more information will be shared when it is available. To hear the details shared at the March 3 session, view the recording on the St. Paul's website (stpaulsk.org/community/the-way-forward).

Here's what we do know -

Delegates to the General Conference voted to adopt two pieces of legislation that have a direct impact on St. Paul's and other UMC congregations. The General Conference voted to adopt the "Traditional Plan," which:

- strengthens language included in the Book of Discipline (the law and doctrine of the UMC) covering LGBTQIA+ individuals
 - The current language (in effect since 1972) states that "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church." (§304.3)
 - Clergy are prohibited from conducting same gender weddings (§2702.b).
- creates minimum sentencing guidelines for clergy who perform same-sex marriages or who are openly gay and partnered.
 - Those guidelines indicate a one-year unpaid suspension for a first clergy violation of the rules included in the Book of Discipline, and revocation of clergy credentials for a second violation (meaning the individual would no longer be qualified to serve in the current or any other church).

The second piece of legislation is an "exit plan" that allows churches to leave the UMC in a more expedited process than the one currently outlined in the Book of Discipline. As currently written, this option would:

- be in effect through 2023;
- allow disaffiliating congregations to retain property under certain financial conditions;
- require disaffiliating congregations to pay the next year's apportionments and any pension obligations and/or existing property debts.

Both pieces of legislation contain clauses that the Judicial Council (the "Supreme Court" of the UMC) has previously ruled unconstitutional. This means that these proposals, or portions of them, may need to be re-written before they can be enacted. The Judicial Council will address these issues at its next scheduled meeting April 23-25 in Evanston, Illinois. Items deemed constitutional by the Judicial Council would be effective January 1, 2020.

What does this mean for St. Paul's?

The decisions made at General Conference leave our congregation with the options to:

- stay in the United Methodist Church and accept/abide by the new legislation (note that if we do nothing, this is what will happen);
- stay in the United Methodist Church and seek to become Reconciling or find other venues to visibly support the LGBTQIA+ community while accepting practical limitations provided under the new legislation;
- explore disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church.

Each of us, regardless of what positions we hold on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, or how much attention we have paid to the process leading to General Conference, are now affected by these legislative actions. As a congregation we will have to make decisions.

We now enter a period of discernment. *Discernment*, in the Christian context, means the process of determining God's desire in a situation or for one's life, or of identifying the true nature of a thing, such as discerning whether a thing is good or evil. The plan for working together on a way forward is to:

- gather for small group conversations beginning after Easter in order to ensure a space for everyone in our community (member or friend) to share feelings and thoughts, and to envision who God is calling us to be and what our congregation could become.
- determine additional steps based on feedback from small groups. (More processing, Bible study, or prayer groups? Exploration of costs associated with disaffiliation?)
- schedule a Church Conference (a vote of the membership) regarding the options currently identified, or something else that might materialize, once the Church Council determines that the above steps have supported our period of discernment.

As individuals, we are each asked during this time to participate in the congregational discernment process, to hold our clergy, lay leaders, and each other in prayer and to actively work to discern where God is calling our church, and each of us individually.

Our clergy will support laity through this process by sharing information and counseling those who need pastoral care. Otherwise they will not express opinions or participate directly in the discernment process, affirming laity as "the church."

For additional information, please view the Frequently Asked Questions pages compiled by Rev. Kate Mackereth Fulton. To sign up to participate in Small Groups for Discernment, please sign up by April 14 using the clipboard in the office, or fill out the form available here: <https://tinyurl.com/y6tastzp>

Small Groups for Discernment and The Way Forward at St. Paul's

March 14, 2019

Prepared by Rev. Kate Mackereth Fulton, Associate Pastor

The Frequently Asked Questions below and the document "Discerning a Way Forward for St. Paul's United Methodist Church" have been assembled to help provide background information and address common concerns arising from the actions at the global 2019 General Conference.

Discernment, in the Christian context, is the process of determining God's desire in a situation or for one's life, or of identifying the true nature of a thing. Small Groups for Discernment (aka "Processing Groups") will be the official way to participate in the discussion about what the future of St. Paul's UMC should look like in the wake of the 2019 General Conference. To participate, sign up on the clipboard in the office or online (<https://tinyurl.com/y6tastzp>). Please sign up by April 14.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How are Small Groups being organized? Can I sign up to facilitate or host one in my neighborhood?

A: Groups will be organized by clergy and lay leaders, and will be facilitated by church members who will receive special training prior to meeting with their groups. Groups will be loosely organized geographically and will have the option to meet in homes or at the church depending on the facilitator's preference. The facilitator for each group will consult group members to determine a mutually agreeable time and location.

Q: I already know what I believe about inclusion. Why do I need to participate in a processing group?

A: Small groups are designed to aid the discernment process for all, including but not limited to those who do not have strong opinions on this issue. They are also a place for each of us to share how these decisions have impacted us, and how we envision St. Paul's advancing its own vision and mission in light of General Conference. Even if you believe that your opinion may not be shared by others, or you're unsure of your opinion, your participation is valuable and your voice is needed as we seek to discern where God is calling our community next.

Q: Are our processing groups confidential? What information will be reported back, and who receives it?

A: Each facilitator will be invited to report back to a steering committee of leaders (our clergy, Church Council chair, and the three lay delegates who represent St. Paul's at our annual Baltimore-Washington Conference meeting) about the broad content of their conversation, areas where the group reached consensus, areas of disagreement, and their sense of what next steps might be most useful. Individual opinions and comments will be kept strictly confidential and will not be reported or shared.

Q: What happens after our processing groups have concluded?

A: Once we have all the feedback from the small groups in hand, the steering committee will prayerfully consider and make suggestions to the Church Council regarding next steps for St. Paul's. Additionally, we should by then have a better idea of what options are "on the table" for consideration, as more information is available. Suggestions may include additional processing, a congregation-wide study or meeting time, or additional research on how a favored path forward will impact St. Paul's practically and financially. After thorough consideration, the Church Council will vote on a recommendation to move the process forward, which may include calling a special Church Conference for a congregation-wide vote of all members, if necessary.

Q: Where can I learn more about Reconciling churches and the Reconciling Ministries Network, and their work advocating for LGBTQ+ justice and inclusion? Can I sign up as a Reconciling Individual?

A: We invite those who would like to learn more to visit <https://rmnetwork.org/> for information, resources, and sign-up information for individuals.

Q: How does the General Conference outcome affect our planned building renovation?

A: As of this moment (March 14), the renovation preparation is proceeding as planned. The Capital Campaign Committee and the Building Committee will review recent events at their next meetings and any further decisions will be communicated to the congregation.

Q: Is there a plan for a new progressive Methodist denomination or association?

A: At this moment we are not aware of any such association. However, the broader situation is still evolving; if and when such an organization makes itself known, information will be provided to our congregation to aid in the discernment process.

Q: How does any future decision we make affect our pastoral leadership?

A: St. Paul's clergy team has elected to remain neutral through this discernment process in order to facilitate a final decision that reflects the will of the congregation rather than that of any one leader. At that point, our clergy and their families will engage in their own discernment process about where God is calling them and share the results of their personal discernment at the appropriate time.

If you have other questions, please contact Rev. Kate Mackereth Fulton directly:
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