

Frequently Asked Questions about St. Paul's Reconciling Process

Why are we having this conversation?

In 2019, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church narrowly voted to 1) maintain the current language in the Book of Discipline describing "homosexuality [as] incompatible with Christian teaching," 2) continued the prohibition on clergy conducting same-sex marriages, 3) continued the prohibition on LGBTQ Christians serving as clergy, and 4) establish strengthened penalties against clergy who violate the Book of Discipline by disobeying 2) and 3). The proposals put forth at the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference and the outcome of the vote prompted our congregation to ask an important question:

"What kind of church does God call St. Paul's UMC to be?"

Although many at St. Paul's UMC had been following the issue of LGBTQ inclusion over the years, our congregation began a formal period of discernment in 2018 with a "Way Forward at St. Paul's Workshop" attended by 75 people. Following the outcome of the 2019 General Conference, the Church Council chartered a series of Small Groups for Discernment (i.e., Processing Groups) with more than 180 participants. After reviewing the reports from the small groups, the Church Council determined significant interest in moving forward with possible membership in the Reconciling Ministries Network.

Although a majority of participants in the small groups expressed support for building a more inclusive church, there was not a consensus on what such inclusion would look like. This and related questions remain unanswered.

What is Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN)?

The Reconciling Ministries Network is a network of over 40,000 United Methodists and over 1,000 churches and communities seeking the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in both the policy and practices of the United Methodist Church.

Any individual, small group, or congregation can join RMN and many from our congregation have already done so, including St. Paul's Youth.

Congregations of the United Methodist Church that are members of RMN must still abide by the Book of Discipline, but are committed to change from the inside.

As a member of RMN, St. Paul's UMC would retain complete authority over worship, programming, and all other aspects of our shared life and community.

What is the process for joining RMN?

Churches are encouraged to undergo a discernment process prior to a vote that includes Bible study, sermon series, small group discussion, and prayer. To join, RMN congregations must hold a church vote resulting in at least 75 percent in favor of membership. Furthermore, congregations must craft a welcoming statement that explicitly references LGBTQ inclusion. Here are some [examples of welcoming statements](#).

Congregations are encouraged, but not required to make an annual contribution to RMN.

Why can't St. Paul's disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church right now?

Under current rules, St. Paul's UMC would need to buy its property (i.e., real estate), which it holds in trust, from the denomination at a percentage of market rate. The Finance Committee determined that the cost to disaffiliate with our property would be approximately \$6 million, too high for our congregation to afford at this time.

The 2020 General Conference will consider a proposal to make it easier for local congregations to disaffiliate from the denomination with their property (i.e., a graceful exit). This may mean a reduction in the percentage of fair market value or the elimination of payment entirely.

Why are we "rushing" to a vote before decisions are made at the 2020 General Conference?

It is likely that the next General Conference in 2020 will result in a formal split of the denomination, made easier with some kind of graceful exit allowing congregations to leave with their property. At that time, St. Paul's UMC will need to decide again on a path to pursue, building on the foundation we have built through our recent discernment process. We are electing to have that conversation now on our own terms, rather than later when forced by action at the General Conference.

Why are we having two votes – one to begin exploring RMN and one to actual vote on joining RMN? Can't we move faster?

The Steering Committee used a questionnaire developed by [Reconciling Works](#), an association of Lutheran churches, to determine how fast or slow we should engage in this process. Our score on this [congregational assessment](#) placed us between a cautious and medium pace.

Our responses to the questionnaire revealed that we have a substantial amount of work to do before we formally put membership in RMN to a church vote. Although a large number of our congregation participated in the processing groups and expressed an interest in building a more inclusive church, we do not yet have a mandate for beginning the work of crafting a welcoming statement, exploring opportunities to reach out to and better minister to the LGBTQ community, and educating the congregation on LGBTQ issues.

An initial church vote will provide that mandate.

Why must members vote in person?

The Book of Discipline has strict guidelines for holding charge conference votes. They must be in person (i.e., no mail-in or proxy ballots) and supervised by church elders assigned by the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

Are we voting to get rid of the Book of Discipline?

No. The church vote on October 13th will decide whether we should begin the task of applying to join the RMN.

Even if we decided to join RMN at a later vote, St. Paul's UMC will remain a congregation of the United Methodist Church and abide by the Book of Discipline. We are not voting to leave the denomination at this time.

Can the UMC possibly enforce the automatic penalties for clergy who violate the Book of Discipline? Many clergy have already done so without consequence.

The automatic penalties approved at the 2019 General Conference will not go into effect until January 2020. The UMC Judicial Council, which reviews all General Conference decisions and enforces the Book of Discipline, has declared these automatic punishments legal and binding.

The initial vote will take place on Columbus Day weekend. Can we reschedule?

Due to the advance notice requirements for such a meeting as given in the Book of Discipline and the limited number of elders available to preside during this busy church conference season, changing the date is not a reasonable option at this time. We have done our best to give ample notice and choose a date that does not present conflicts within our existing church schedule.

Postponing the vote until later in the year would interfere with church and family Thanksgiving and Christmas activities.

We understand that not everyone will be able to attend the initial vote to begin exploring membership in RMN. If the October vote results in a majority in favor of exploring membership in RMN, the Church Council, in consultation with the Steering Committee, will identify a date in 2020 for holding a more consequential church vote on joining RMN. We hope that everyone who wants to express their views during this RMN membership vote will be able to.

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

St. Paul's UMC 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.