



Local Church Discernment Process

Frequently Asked Questions

Has The United Methodist Church formally split?

No. The General Conference is the only body that speaks for The United Methodist Church, and the Book of Discipline cannot be changed without the approval of General Conference delegates.

Since the formation of The United Methodist Church in 1968, United Methodists have disagreed on matters of human sexuality. A special session of the General Conference was called in 2019 to address those differences, and delegates affirmed the existing language in the Book of Discipline about human sexuality.

Multiple pieces of legislation proposed for consideration at the 2020 General Conference were designed to help the denomination divide gracefully. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the postponement of that meeting three times. The General Conference is now scheduled to convene in 2024, at which time legislation addressing the future of the denomination can be considered.

Does the South Carolina Conference uphold the Book of Discipline?

Yes. Bishop Holston, the Cabinet, the Board of Ordained Ministry, the Clergy Session and other conference groups have maintained their vows to adhere to the Discipline in all matters.

What is the process for local churches in South Carolina to separate from The United Methodist Church?

The process spelled out in [Paragraph 2553](#) of the Book of Discipline was established for local churches whose members wish to explore disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church because they disagree with the Book of Discipline's provisions regarding human sexuality.

The newly established Congregational Discernment Process, which is grounded in [Paragraph 2549](#) of the Discipline, was developed for local churches whose members firmly hold a belief that the denomination has not consistently upheld its stated doctrine on issues of human sexuality.

FAQ – LAITY

Is our congregation required to enter a discernment process right now?

No. Only congregations that are exploring separation from The United Methodist Church through the new Congregational Discernment Process will undergo a mandatory 30-day discernment period, guided by the district superintendent. However, if your congregation is not seeking to separate from The United Methodist Church, you do not need to undergo a discernment process.

What happens if our congregation votes to separate from the UMC, but I want to remain in The United Methodist Church?

You can join another local United Methodist Church and transfer your membership there, or transfer your membership temporarily to your district's membership roll until you can find a new church home.

If my church separates, can I continue to serve in a District, Conference, Jurisdictional or General Church leadership role to which I was elected?

Lay members who serve in elected roles at the district, conference, jurisdictional or denominational levels must be members of The United Methodist Church. If you are currently serving in an elected position and you maintain your UMC membership, you would be able to continue in that role.

What happens if our congregation votes to separate from the UMC, but our pastor wants to remain in The United Methodist Church?

In that scenario, the pastor would remain with The United Methodist Church and the bishop would work to secure a new appointment for them.

What happens if our pastor decides to leave the UMC, but our congregation wishes to continue as a United Methodist church?

The bishop would appoint a new pastor to your congregation.

If our congregation continues in The United Methodist Church, will we have to receive a pastor that conflicts with our traditional or progressive beliefs?

The bishop consults prayerfully with district superintendents to ensure that pastoral appointments are fruitful. They receive input from both clergy and local church Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) to understand the needs and ministry priorities of the congregation.

What if one of the congregations on a multipoint charge votes to separate from The United Methodist Church, but the others wish to continue as United Methodists?

Each congregation can make its own decision regarding remaining with The United Methodist Church or separating from the denomination. If one church on a charge separates, the others will be able to continue ministry as United Methodist congregations.

If our congregation is considering separation, where should we go for more information?

Your pastor or church council should contact your district superintendent.

FAQ – CLERGY

If the church chooses to separate, does the pastor have to withdraw?

No.

Will clergy be able to continue in the same pension and health benefits program if they leave The United Methodist Church?

Clergy who decide to separate from The United Methodist Church will not be covered by their current HealthFlex benefits plan or Clergy Retirement Security Program because both are specific to the UMC. Current HealthFlex participants may maintain health coverage under Continuation Coverage for up to 18 months, but they will be responsible for the entire premium amount.

Will retired clergy still receive their pension if they leave The United Methodist Church?

Yes, an already retired clergyperson who surrenders credentials (voluntarily or involuntarily) after retirement or terminates their conference relationship does not lose earned pension benefits. Earned pension benefits are vested under the terms of the retirement plans and cannot be taken away. However, the clergyperson may forgo certain future pension benefit increases, such as past service rate (PSR) increases under the Pre-1982 Plan. Additionally, the retired clergyperson might have other benefits in retirement that could be affected by termination. Example: retiree medical coverage, which is subject to the rules and policies of the annual conference.

Will the pensions of clergy surviving spouses be impacted by churches separating from The United Methodist Church?

No. If you currently are receiving pension payments from Wespath as a surviving spouse or other contingent annuitant or beneficiary, your pension benefits will not change as a result of the separation of your local church.

What should a pastor do if a congregation desires to discuss separating from The United Methodist Church or asks to hold a Church Conference?

Pastors should consult with their district superintendent, who will then work with the pastor and congregation to assess and discern the best route to achieve the congregation's goal.

[More details about clergy matters](#)

FAQ – THE PROCESS

Why does our congregation have to go through a discernment process to separate from The United Methodist Church?

The decision to separate from The United Methodist Church is one that should not be made in haste. Therefore, conference officials have included the mandatory 30-day discernment period as part of the Congregational Discernment Process to ensure that all members have the opportunity to be heard about whether the church should take such a momentous step.

Who decides for a church whether or not to pursue separation?

After a mandatory 30-day period of discernment, the professing members of a local church's congregation vote on whether to remain with or separate from the denomination.

Our church wants to enter the discernment process. How do we start?

Your church council should consult with the district superintendent.

Who sets the terms of separation for South Carolina congregations?

The Trustees of the Annual Conference.

Are there costs to a congregation pursuing separation? How are those costs determined?

Yes. Specific details about the financial obligations and legal liability considerations of a particular church are available from the district superintendent.

Our church wants to separate, but we do not have the funds to pay all the financial costs of the process. Can we offer a promissory note and make payments on this debt?

No, all financial obligations must be paid in full before a resolution for a local church to separate can be presented to members of the Annual Conference for approval.

What deadlines need to be considered?

There is no "sunset" provision with the newly established Congregational Discernment Process, but there is an annual deadline that must be met. A congregational vote must be taken at a Church Conference meeting by March 1 each year to be considered by Annual Conference delegates during their regular session the following June.