

# **Details On Current Matters within the United Methodist Church**



**Questions & Answers**

**FAIRHOPE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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**From Dr. Darren M. McClellan**  
**Senior Minister of Fairhope United Methodist Church**

*My Father is still working, and I also am working... (John 5:17).*


These words of Jesus have stayed close to my mind and heart in this season of ministry. As the gospel of John records the original scene, Jesus was facing persecution for simply trying to get something done in God's good name. Don't mess with our Sabbath they said to Him. Oh, what a familiar refrain! When one considers the impact of unmerited grace to all, even the offering of healing can be perceived as a threat.

As tensions rise over the present controversies of the United Methodist Church at large, I cannot help but reconsider the relevance of Jesus' question to the one who claimed to be paralyzed by the status quo---do you want to be made well? (John 5:6).

It might seem like a silly question to those who are tired of suffering. And yet, there is a reason we do not find it so easy to 'stand up and walk.' In the gospel account, 'being made well' does not mean 'have it your way.' The invitation of Jesus is always one of self-surrender.

Wherever the Church is able to follow in this way, we see blessing and growth. Thanks to your faithfulness and generosity in this congregation, we are living our call to "love boldly, casting the light of Jesus into the world." From continued growth in membership and strong programming to selfless missional service and outreach, the future is big and bright at Fairhope UMC. From this strong foundation, we are continuing our focus to grow in our relationships, in the depth of our spiritual formation, and in our community outreach.

As we give thanks for the evidence of God's work in our life together, we also take seriously those distractions which might otherwise threaten to distract us from our primary mission of disciple-making. Therefore, this packet is offered as a means of communication around several important topics related to our larger United Methodist family and how those topics pertain to our congregation, specifically around the matters related to



marriage and ordination of LGBTQ persons. This packet is designed to be an educational tool for this particular season in our story. I encourage you to use this material as a discernment guide and as a prompt to prayer. For some of you, this information is familiar. Others will be learning about it for the first time. Nevertheless, together my hope is that this will help to provide a common language and platform on which to build as we continue these discussions together as the Fairhope UMC family.

As your pastor, I am committed to listen, pray, discern, and walk with you as we have this conversation. As you may hear me say a lot these days, “we have to go through it in order to get to it.” My role is to guide you through it so that Fairhope UMC can continue to love, grow and serve in the name of Jesus Christ, growing in the knowledge of our Lord, and using our unique gifts of the Spirit to make a difference in our corner of the world and beyond.

In my own story, I can remember joining the United Methodist Church with my mother in 1992. That Sunday was my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. I barely understood the profession of faith that I was making at the time. I had not been raised in the church, I had never read the Bible, and I could barely mumble some semblance of the Apostle’s Creed. What I did know was that my only sibling had just left for college and that my parents were in the middle of a divorce. I was a mess. I was sure that the rest of those people in the pews would kick me out as soon as they got to know me. And yet, the grace of God--revealed to me through the theology and practices of that United Methodist Church--made a space for me, prayer. Furthermore, it taught me a love for the Scriptures, and the traditions of the Church which have helped me to make peace with God, with my neighbor, and with myself.

It led me to identify with the witness of the Apostle Paul, believing that ...now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he

came to proclaim peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2: 13-18)

That same accessible, responsible grace has been shaping my story ever since. Not to give me what I want, of course, but in helping to make me well.

You likely have your own story and song about your commitment to Jesus Christ and your covenant with the United Methodist Church. Therefore, it affects all of us that our denomination finds itself amid such deep division. Not only do our personal stories stand to be impacted by a denominational split, but also, I know so many of you have United Methodist roots that run deeply throughout your family's story. The times in which we find ourselves are intensely personal, emotional, and concerning. We are on this journey together. I hope this material will help to guide our conversations.

On August 31, 2022, the Committee on Nominations began the discussion of how best to build a Discernment Team from within the diversity of our congregation. The purpose of this team will be to do a deep dive into the question of disaffiliation as it now stands in the UMC and to evaluate the potential impact of such a decision for Fairhope UMC.

In essence, we are looking for a fair representation of church members who are already actively engaged in keeping covenant with Fairhope UMC through their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness to help guide us in what will ultimately be a decision for the congregation as a whole.

We hope to have a list of nominees for the new Discernment Team to present to the next Board of Stewards meeting on September 15 at 6pm. On behalf of the Committee on Nominations, I am asking each adult Sunday School class to work together in submitting 2-3 names of persons who would be gifted to serve in this capacity. Our goal is to have one representative from each adult class, at least one member of our Trustees, Finance, and Staff Parish Relations Committee, our elected Lay Leaders, and two members of our current youth ministry. Our target for the total composition of this team is no more than 17 persons.

I have asked one of our Lay Leaders, Mrs. Emily Garner and our Director of Caring Ministries, Dr. Ann Pearson, to serve as co-chairs of the future Discernment Team. Recommendations for the team can be submitted to [julia.gavin@fairhopeumc.org](mailto:julia.gavin@fairhopeumc.org)

In the coming months, you will receive additional information in the form of emails, videos, studies, and messages in worship. I encourage you to stay tuned to these resources within our congregation.

I believe that God is with us as we engage this process with the very best that is within us. Even though it will be a great challenge, know that it is nevertheless my joy to serve as your Pastor at this time. This work will require our best. But we shall not do it alone.

*In Him the whole structure is joined together...* (Ephesians 2:21).

Lord, let it be so!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Darren", with a stylized, cursive script.

Darren



## How did we get here?

From the time John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" at Aldersgate Street in 1738, the "people called Methodists" have evolved into who we are today, the United Methodist Church, with a commitment to "spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land." The UMC was formed in 1968, and for the last 50 years, the UMC has had conversations regarding LGBTQ marriage and ordination rites. Every four years since 1972, this is a topic of conversation at the General Conference.<sup>1</sup> As stated in the Book of Discipline,<sup>2</sup> the position of the UMC on homosexuality has not changed.<sup>3</sup> But at the 2019 General Conference, the Book of Discipline changed to the most traditional and conservative language on this matter specific to violations of the Book of Discipline.<sup>4</sup>

At this same General Conference, paragraph 2553 was also passed, which gives grounds for a church to leave the UMC in regards to human sexuality. It is the only recognized pathway of disaffiliation that will allow a local church to retain its property. This paragraph, however, allows for disaffiliation "from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow." This paragraph was designed with our current situation in mind (though exactly how it applies is still a matter of debate in some circles).

In 2020, Bishop John Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference called together leaders at different ends of the theological spectrum to determine what it means for a local church to reach a healthy separation from the United Methodist Church. This resulted in *The Protocol for Grace and Reconciliation through Separation*, known as *The Protocol*. Traditionalist leaders sought to continue the church's prohibition on LGBTQ marriages and ordinations in the UMC. Progressive leaders sought to remove such prohibitions.

Many believed *The Protocol* was the means of closure to these bitter disagreements. However, just months after *The Protocol* was introduced, our world was changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The regular General Conference set for Spring 2020, where *The Protocol* would be reviewed, was postponed to 2021, 2022, and, in March of this year, 2024. With each postponement, the likelihood of its adoption lessened.

On May 1, 2022, the Global Methodist Church, the likely resultant traditionalist denomination coming from legislation connected with *The Protocol*, launched. Since that time, drafters and supporters of *The Protocol* have disavowed their support of this legislation for separation. In other words, there is no current legislation for separation to present to General Conference 2024. Whether new legislation will be drafted and presented or if a local church decides to take an alternative route for separation, the current stance on LGBTQ marriage and ordination remains the same: LGBTQ marriage and ordination are not allowed within the church, clergy can be punished for performing LGBTQ weddings or engaging in homosexuality, and scripturally our church does not condone homosexuality.



## **Is the UMC splitting?**

Not officially, but there are individual churches disaffiliating from the UMC.



## **How does disaffiliation work?**

In the Alabama West Florida Conference of the UMC, paragraph 2553 is the disciplinary basis on which a local church may disaffiliate from the UMC. Here are a few things to consider that influence the enactment of paragraph 2553:

1. There is a cost based on a formula adopted by our Annual Conference. This formula includes, in part, a calculation based on apportionments, post-retirement medical coverage for clergy, and unfunded pension liabilities.
2. There is a time frame for a local church to initiate disaffiliation



based on paragraph 2553. As of now, that time frame expires on December 31, 2023. However, every indication is that other options for disaffiliation will be on the table in the future.

3. John Wesley's Trust Clause would be revoked. Each church, like a congregational system, will retain its property.

## **How does this relate to FAIRHOPE UMC?**

Our congregation, at 110 years old, is among the most theologically diverse in Methodism. We are the Methodist middle. On a given Sunday, we worship alongside parishioners of many cultures who are liberal, conservative, gay, straight, vocal, silent, Republican, Democrat, Independent, patient, impatient, sinner, and saint. We break bread together on Wednesday evenings and at Sunday School gatherings with people who think differently than we think. We serve our local and foreign mission partners alongside persons of varying theological persuasions. The wide Methodist middle is who we are and have always been.

That said, our membership cares deeply for our local church. Due to diversity within our flock, we have members who want us to remain United Methodist and members who would consider disaffiliating to other Methodist expressions. Some of these include the Free Methodist Church, the Global Methodist Church (GMC), and the progressive Methodist expression. Still, others are committed to Fairhope UMC regardless of denominational affiliation. Engaging in these conversations openly with one another will be important for God's Kingdom, our community, our Annual Conference, and our church family.

## **Are options available to Fairhope UMC?**

Of course. Possible paths for us are as follows:

- ♦ Remain United Methodist.
- ♦ Disaffiliate and leave the UMC:
  - A. Join the different evangelical denomination, including the Global

Methodist Church, Free Methodist Church, or some other Wesleyan denomination.

B. Become an independent church.

- Wait for an outcome and reassess following the 2024 General Conference, where potential new legislation relating to these matters could receive attention.



## **If there is substantial interest in disaffiliation, who votes, when, and how?**

Some decisions in the local church can only be made at a Church Conference. The decision on whether to disaffiliate is one of these decisions. There would be a called Church Conference at which all professing members of Fairhope UMC would be eligible to vote. Currently, this number is over 2,500. You must be present to vote. The threshold for disaffiliation is a 2/3 majority of those present.

After a period of due diligence by the Discernment Team, a proposal will be brought forward to the Board of Stewards (likely early summer of 2023). Then, after prayerful consideration of the proposal, the Board of Stewards, in partnership with the Senior Minister, will communicate the expressed interest and findings of the discernment process to the congregation at large. Furthermore, the District Superintendent (DS) would be informed, and a disaffiliation process may ensue. A vote might or might not be a result of this process.

In sum, the discernment process will be as follows:

1. Pray.
2. Inform the congregation and have the opportunity for substantive conversation. We hope to do this regardless of any church vote.
3. Invite all persons who are professing members of the church.
4. Give enough notice that each person has been adequately notified in order to ensure a healthy process.

## **Additional considerations?**

Yes. We must be mindful that our community and the world are watching our witness. The local church has the unique opportunity to model healthy forms of conflict resolution, to rise above our disagreements for the good of the whole, and to love each other even when discussions become lively. There are no winners and losers. We are part of a 2500+- member family. Like siblings who argue, I pray we will remain sisters and brothers who figure out a way to move forward together. No one should feel spiritually homeless because of a denominational dispute. There is not a perfect church or a perfect pastor. There is only a perfect savior, Jesus, who taught us to die to ourselves for the sake of others.

## **What happens next?**

Take a deep breath. Listen to one another. Pray for your church family and its leaders. Come to worship. Attend a small group study. Find a place to service within this blessed body. Have loving conversations with others in the congregation, especially those whose perspectives may be different from your own. Trust that the God who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is still working here at Fairhope UMC for good of the coming Kingdom. Then, actively participate. Your questions are welcome, and your voice is valued.

**Submit your questions online at [fairhopeumc.org/dquestions](https://fairhopeumc.org/dquestions)**

### **Footnotes**

**1** General Conference: The highest legislative body in the United Methodist Church. The voting membership consists of an equal number of clergy and lay delegates elected by the annual conferences. General Conference convenes every quadrennium (four years) to determine the denomination's future direction. It is the only body that can speak officially for the denomination.

**2** A fundamental book outlining the law, doctrine, administration, organizational work and procedures of the United Methodist Church. Each General Conference amends The Book of Discipline, and the actions of the General Conference are reflected in the quadrennial revision. Often referred to as The Discipline.

**3** From the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016*

Paragraph 161 (G) - Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage...We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God... The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teachings.

#### 4 From the *Book of Discipline*: ¶2553. Disaffiliation of a Local Church Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality.

1. Because of the current deep conflict within the United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.

##### 2. Time Limits.

The choice by a local church to disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church under this paragraph shall be made in sufficient time for the process for exiting the denomination to be complete prior to December 31, 2023. The provisions of ¶ 2553 expire on December 31, 2023 and shall not be used after that date.

##### 3. Decision Making Process.

The church conference shall be conducted in accordance with ¶ 248 and shall be held within one hundred twenty (120) days after the district superintendent calls for the church conference. In addition to the provisions of ¶ 246.8, special attention shall be made to give broad notice to the full professing membership of the local church regarding the time and place of a church conference called for this purpose and to use all means necessary, including electronic communication where possible, to communicate. The decision to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference.

##### 4. Process Following Decision to Disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church.

If the church conference votes to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church, the terms and conditions for that disaffiliation shall be established by the board of trustees of the applicable annual conference, with the advice of the cabinet, the annual conference treasurer, the annual conference benefits officer, the director of connectional ministries, and the annual conference chancellor.

The terms and conditions, including the effective date of disaffiliation, shall be memorialized in a binding Disaffiliation Agreement between the annual conference and the trustees of the local church, acting on behalf of the members. That agreement must be consistent with the following provisions:

##### a) Standard Terms of the Disaffiliation Agreement.

The General Council on Finance and Administration shall develop a standard form for Disaffiliation Agreements under this paragraph to protect The United Methodist Church as set forth in ¶ 807.9. The agreement shall include a recognition of the validity and applicability of ¶ 2501, notwithstanding the release of property therefrom. Annual conferences may develop additional standard terms that are not inconsistent with the standard form of this paragraph.

##### b) Apportionments.

The local church shall pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of apportionments.

##### c) Property.

A disaffiliating local church shall have the right to retain its real and personal, tangible and intangible property. All transfers of property shall be made prior to disaffiliation. All costs for transfer of title or other legal work shall be borne by the disaffiliating local church.

##### d) Pension Liabilities.

The local church shall contribute withdrawal liability in an amount equal to its pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference. The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits shall determine the aggregate funding obligations of the annual conference using market factors similar to a commercial annuity provider, from which the annual conference will determine the local church's share.

##### e) Other Liabilities.

The local church shall satisfy all other debts, loans, and liabilities, or assign and transfer them to its new entity, prior to disaffiliation.

f) Payment Terms.

Payment shall occur prior to the effective date of departure.

g) Disaffiliating Churches Continuing as Plan Sponsors of the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits Plans.

The United Methodist Church believes that a local church disaffiliating under ¶2553 shall continue to share common religious bonds and convictions with The United Methodist Church based on shared Wesleyan theology and tradition and Methodist roots, unless the local church expressly resolves to the contrary. As such, a local church disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 shall continue to be eligible to sponsor voluntary employee benefit plans through the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits under ¶ 1504.2, subject to the applicable terms and conditions of the plans.

h) Once the disaffiliating local church has reimbursed the applicable annual conference for all funds due under the agreement, and provided that there are no other outstanding liabilities or claims against The United Methodist Church as a result of the disaffiliation, in consideration of the provisions of this paragraph, the applicable annual conference shall release any claims that it may have under ¶ 2501 and other paragraphs of The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church commonly referred to as the trust clause, or under the agreement.





# Reflection and Questions

Your notes, reflections, and questions below.



