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www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-series-is-the-umc-really (Parts 1-12)

With some congregations considering leaving The United Methodist Church or just wondering about its future, Ask The UMC offers a series of questions and answers to help clear up some common misperceptions or misinformation around disaffiliation.

Graphic by Laurens Glass, United Methodist Communications.

At *Ask The UMC*, we have been answering an increasing number of questions from congregations wondering about the future of The United Methodist Church and whether they should consider disaffiliating from it. Among these have been some recurrent questions that reflect misperceptions or misinformation that some congregations are receiving as they are discerning their next steps.

This is a series of articles where we present to offer accurate responses to such misperceptions or misinformation. This article focuses on matters relating to theology, pensions, benefits, & human sexuality.

We welcome your questions, and invite you to contribute to future articles in this series by sharing what you are hearing about the process of disaffiliation or the future of The United Methodist Church. Write to AskTheUMC@umc.org.

Is The UMC really...

1. Splitting at this time?

No. The term “split” applies when there is a negotiated agreement within the denomination to divide assets and resources. No such agreement has been made in The United Methodist Church. The earliest point at which such an agreement could be made would be at the next General Conference to be held in 2024.

A more accurate term, as suggested by the Rev. William Lawrence, retired dean of Perkins School of Theology and former member of the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church, is “[splintering](#).” What is happening is that some traditionalist leaders have decided to create their own denomination (the Global Methodist Church). Leaders of that denomination and other unofficial advocacy groups, such as the [Wesleyan Covenant Association](#), which created it, are encouraging like-minded United Methodist congregations and clergy to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church and join their denomination instead.

2. Asking traditionalists to leave the denomination?

No. The requests for disaffiliations are coming largely from traditionalists. Keith Boyette, former president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and now leader of the Global Methodist Church, describes the reasons he and other leaders are asking traditionalists to leave beginning at 13:32 in this video:

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/um-news-to-interview-protocol-developers>

3. About to alter its doctrine to deny the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or salvation through Christ alone?

No. All of these positions are bedrock in the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church, more specifically in the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. These cannot be altered without a two-thirds vote of the General Conference followed by a three-fourths aggregate approval of all annual conferences of The United Methodist Church worldwide. There is no basis to conclude such majorities can be achieved to alter the Articles and

Confession for any reason.

Here is what the Articles and Confession say on these matters. And will continue to say.

Virgin Birth and Divinity of Jesus

Articles of Religion, Article II:

"The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin."

Confession of Faith, Article II:

"We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, in whom the divine and human natures are perfectly and inseparably united. He is the eternal Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Articles of Religion, Article III:

Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day.

Confession of Faith, Article II:

"Jesus Christ... was buried, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to be with the Father, from whence he shall return."

Salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ

Articles of Religion, Article IX:

"We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith."

Confession of Faith, Article IX:

"We believe we are never accounted righteous before God through our works or merit, but that penitent sinners are justified or accounted righteous before God only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

4. Intending to change the Bible?

No. The United Methodist Church has no official translation of the Bible and has never sought to alter the Bible at all. United Methodists have always had a variety of views about how to interpret specific passages of Scripture and likely always will.

5. Allowing congregations that exit the denomination to continue to offer the same pension and health benefits programs to their clergy and staff?

No. The Book of Discipline does not permit non-UMC entities to be plan sponsors of the Clergy Retirement Security Program. Only a General Conference can change this. Churches that disaffiliate will face changes to the benefits they can offer their clergy. Individual congregations and clergy that join the Global Methodist Church (GMC) will be eligible to participate in a retirement plan offered by the GMC, which will be a Wespath defined-contribution retirement plan similar to a United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (UMPIP).

Elders and deacons who withdraw under Discipline ¶360 will have all assets accrued in CRSP and previous programs in which they may have participated (defined benefit and defined contribution) converted into a cash equivalent and placed into their United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (UMPIP). Future retirement plan contributions may be made to the new retirement plan described above which, like UMPIP, is a personal retirement account subject to the effects of the stock market and other investments on its value.

Nor, at this time, is it possible for *individual congregations* (whether in the Global Methodist Church or in the UMC) to be plan sponsors for the HealthFlex health insurance programs Wespath offers unless a congregation has more than 50 eligible employees. United Methodist annual conferences are the plan sponsors for congregations with fewer than 50 eligible employees. This means individual congregations with fewer than 50 eligible employees currently participating in these programs that exit The United Methodist Church at this time can no longer offer these benefits to their clergy and employees effective with the date of disaffiliation. Clergy currently covered by HealthFlex, whether they disaffiliate or not, are eligible to continue on the health insurance plan by paying 100% of the costs themselves for up to 18 months. At that point, the HealthFlex plan is no longer available to them. Individual congregations and clergy who join the Global Methodist Church may participate in the health benefits selected by

the Global Methodist Church, which may include HealthFlex. For additional information, see this FAQ from Wespath: <https://www.wespath.org/assets/1/7/5641.pdf>

6. Immediately dropping all prohibitions related to human sexuality, now that the Global Methodist Church has been officially started?

No. The creation of the Global Methodist Church has no bearing on the existing policies of The United Methodist Church. The policies of The United Methodist Church are set by its General Conference. The General Conference is the only body that can change them. The General Conference is scheduled to meet next in 2024 at a time and venue to be announced.

7. Going to drop all prohibitions related to human sexuality at its next General Conference in 2024?

Probably not. The 2024 General Conference will certainly *consider* legislative proposals that would drop several existing prohibitions. There are items that could authorize clergy who choose to do so to preside at same-sex weddings or union ceremonies. There are several proposals to drop the statement “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” Some proposals would remove the current policy that forbids committees and boards of ordained ministry and clergy sessions to approve and bishops to license, commission, ordain, or appoint self-avowed, practicing homosexuals as clergy. Another would drop the prohibition on annual conferences and general agencies to provide any funding for any activity or publication that promotes “the acceptance of homosexuality.”

The key words are *consider* and *proposal*. The General Conference must *consider* all legislative items it receives. All legislative items before a General Conference are *proposals* only. They have no force unless a General Conference approves them.

All of these kinds of proposals have come before General Conferences in the past. And all have been defeated, every time.

At present, there do not appear to be enough shifts in the makeup of the delegations to the General Conference in 2024 to conclude that any of these proposals will pass.

8. Going to require its clergy and clergy candidates to agree to offer same-sex weddings as a condition of candidacy, status, or appointment?

No. There are no proposals before the next General Conference to do so, nor have there ever been such proposals.

As noted above, proposals to permit clergy who choose to do so to preside at such ceremonies have come before previous General Conferences and will come before the 2024 General Conference. All such proposals have been defeated in the past. And there is no basis, considering the makeup of the delegations, to conclude this will change in 2024.

9. Ordaining drag queens and supporting worship of a “Queer God?”

No and no.

Both of these allegations are based on things that actually happened. But both of those things have been seriously misrepresented.

No United Methodist bishop has ever ordained, commissioned, or licensed a drag queen.

So what is that allegation based on?

The Vermillion River District of The Illinois Great Rivers Conference voted unanimously [to approve the certification](#) of Mr. Isaac Simmons as a candidate for ordained ministry in 2021. The Book of Discipline prohibits “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals” from being certified as candidates for ordination. Mr Simmons identifies as a gay man, but not as a practicing homosexual. He also performs under the drag name, Penny Cost, for the purposes of evangelism in audiences made up of people of many sexual and gender identities. Nothing in the Book of Discipline disqualifies persons who are gay but not practicing or who perform in drag from consideration or certification as a candidate.

The vote by a district committee to certify a candidate is one of the earliest steps in a process toward ordination. The process typically takes 5-8 years to complete.

Being approved by a district committee for candidacy is not being named clergy in The United Methodist Church. That can occur only after substantial work toward the completion of seminary educational requirements, ongoing supervision over a period of years, and ultimately approval for commissioning by a 3/4 vote of the clergy session of the annual conference. Until that time, if assigned by a district superintendent to serve a local church, candidates cannot preside at sacraments or at weddings.

The reference to supporting the worship of "Queer God" comes from a chapel service at Duke Divinity School sponsored by an LGBTQ+ student group. Duke Divinity School serves students of many denominations, not just United Methodists. And students of many denominations make up the LGBTQ group that sponsored the service in question, as that service has been described [in some publications](#). Exactly one of the students named is identified as United Methodist, and that student is, at this point, a candidate, not yet clergy in The UMC. Further, such "group sponsored" services represent the views of their sponsoring organization, not the Divinity School, nor its faculty. Such services are not a basis for making any statements about the beliefs or views of The United Methodist Church. General Conference establishes the official statements of The United Methodist Church and its ritual. Chapel services in a seminary do not.

10. Ignoring or refusing to implement the Discipline's statements, restrictions, and requirements regarding practicing homosexuals and same sex weddings?

In the majority of conferences, no. In some conferences, it may appear so. In those placing these matters "in abeyance," also no.

Ignoring the Discipline?

The bishops of the Western Jurisdiction have [publicly stated](#) that they will not "withhold or challenge ordination based on a candidate's gender identity or sexual orientation."

The Discipline nowhere states that gender identity or sexual orientation is a basis for withholding or challenging ordination. The Discipline does prohibit district committees on ordination from certifying as candidates and bishops from licensing, commissioning, ordaining, or appointing as clergy persons who are "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals." Stating one is homosexual is not disqualifying. What is disqualifying is being or being proven to a jury of peers in a church trial to be a self-avowed, practicing homosexual. So this statement of the Western Jurisdiction bishops does not ignore the Discipline.

The statement by the bishops of the Western Jurisdiction also says, "We are unwilling to punish clergy who celebrate the marriage of two adults of any gender or sexual orientation seeking the blessing of God and the Church for their covenanted life together." Bishops do not apply "punishments" as part of the complaint process. Rather, bishops oversee the process to its conclusion. If a church trial is necessary, bishops preside at the church trial. If guilt is found in a church trial, it is not the bishop who imposes a "sentence." It is the jury of peers who both reach a verdict and set a sentence. The Discipline names a mandatory minimum sentence the jury must apply to those found guilty of having conducted a same-sex marriage or union ceremony: one year suspension without pay. No other offense has a mandatory minimum sentence. See ¶2711.3 of the [2019 revision](#) to the Book of Discipline. Since bishops do not "punish" in the complaint process, this statement does not ignore the requirements of the Discipline. Instead, it expresses the intent of the bishops not to be punitive.

The [district superintendents in the Iowa Conference](#) have announced they will "grant contextual permission" for clergy of the conference to preside at same-sex weddings in Iowa effective in January 2022.

Examples such as this, in which some provisions of the current Discipline may be over-ridden through contextual permission by a district superintendent, are a rare exception. No other conference has stated this kind of policy to date.

Abeyance: Refusing to Implement the Discipline?

While there are few examples that come close to "ignoring the Discipline," a number of bishops and some cabinets have indicated their commitment, in the words of the [Minnesota Conference extended cabinet](#), to hold in abeyance all... administrative and judicial complaint processes addressing restrictions in the *Book of Discipline* regarding gay and lesbian clergy and/or same-sex weddings until after General Conference meets and action related to the separation of the denomination can be considered."

What is abeyance, and where did this idea come from?

The term "abeyance" means "delay." It does not mean a refusal to implement the Discipline. It means delaying further action on certain kinds of charges for a limited period of time and for particular reasons. Bishops who have announced they are placing such charges in abeyance are not refusing to implement the Discipline. They are indicating they *will* process such charges in light of actions that take place at a later time.

This approach to dealing with such charges began with the development of the so-called [Protocol legislation](#), announced in January 2020.

While the Protocol legislation has no effect unless or until a General Conference approves it, the process of developing it included [a commitment by all of its signers](#), including key leaders of traditionalist organizations and eight United Methodist bishops from across the connection. Article V of the agreement states, "As one expression of reconciliation and grace through separation, the undersigned agree that all administrative or judicial processes addressing restrictions in the *Book of Discipline* related to self-avowed practicing homosexuals or same-sex weddings shall be held in abeyance beginning January 1, 2020 through the adjournment of the first conference of the post-separation United Methodist Church. Clergy shall continue to remain in good standing while such complaints are held in abeyance."

The term "post-separation United Methodist Church" referred originally to the General Conference in 2024, assuming the General Conference meeting in 2020 would have passed the Protocol or other terms of separating the denomination. Since the 2020 General Conference is now delayed to 2024, the first post-separation General Conference would be in 2028. And the term separation involves an action of the General Conference. It does not apply to the decision of the Wesleyan Covenant Association to launch the Global Methodist Church prior to the next General Conference.

The part of the Protocol [agreement](#) calling for abeyance for some period of time, originally signed by eight bishops, has since also been committed to by several other bishops in the United States. Signers of this statement also included Keith Boyette, formerly leader of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and currently leader of the Global Methodist Church. Boyette has separately [stated his agreement](#) with a practice of abeyance on such charges until a General Conference can meet to decide next steps.

To those on all "sides" who indicated their support for abeyance effective in 2020, abeyance in processing such charges was not seen as a refusal to implement the Discipline. Rather, it represented and represents the hope for a less stressful time of separation leading up to and following the action of a General Conference to create such a separation.

What can we accurately say about the isolated examples noted and the wider practice of abeyance? The Discipline's statements, restrictions, and requirements regarding self-avowed, practicing clergy and same-sex marriages are unevenly enforced in The United Methodist Church at this time. Initiatives by individual conferences or jurisdictions are one source of this unevenness. The practice of abeyance derives from a mutual agreement of United Methodists who identify as progressive, centrist, and traditionalist. Still, the provisions of the Discipline remain in force and are more widely more enforced across the whole denomination, worldwide, than not.

11. Able to allow congregations to sidestep the requirements of Paragraph 2553 in the Book of Discipline by using Paragraph 2548.2 as an alternative path to disaffiliation?

No. [Judicial Council Decision 1449](#) is clear: "[T]he process in ¶ 2548.2 may not be used as a pathway for local churches to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church."

What is at stake in this question? The [Wesleyan Covenant Association](#) (WCA), an independent advocacy group, in collaboration with the [National Center for Life and Liberty](#) (NCLL, an unrelated "[nonprofit legal ministry](#)") has encouraged churches in several conferences ([Florida](#), [Western North Carolina](#), [Eastern Pennsylvania](#), with "[similar group actions](#)" expected to proceed in the Western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Peninsula-Delaware conferences) to file or threaten to join NCLL-led lawsuits against their conferences unless the conferences immediately cease to require the "onerous" conditions of [Paragraph 2553](#) and instead [allow congregations to disaffiliate under Paragraph 2548.2](#).

That paragraph in the Discipline has been put forward for some time now [by the WCA](#) and [others](#) to suggest that: a)

there could be a lower threshold of voting (based on a simple majority of a charge conference instead of the two-thirds majority of a called church conference); b) no payments would be required; and c) the whole matter could be addressed through a transfer of the congregation, its property, and its assets to another evangelical denomination through a comity agreement that each conference could, if it so chose, simply create.

The Judicial Council decision makes clear what has always been the case about this paragraph. It has nothing to do with local congregations disaffiliating from the denomination. It has to do solely with the transfer of property. The only paragraph in the Discipline that provides a means for a local church to become disaffiliated from The United Methodist Church while retaining its property and assets is Paragraph 2553.

The decision also notes that annual conferences have no authority to create a comity agreement. The Council of Bishops develops the agreement, which must then be ratified by a General Conference to become effective. In the case of the Global Methodist Church, neither of those actions has occurred. There is no basis even for a transfer of property under any comity agreement with the Global Methodist Church because no such agreement exists or can exist at this time.

Paragraph 2553 was adopted by the special called General Conference of 2019. It was introduced through a [substitute motion](#) from an advocate for the Traditional Plan. The motion to substitute passed by a margin of two votes (402-400). The reason for the substitution was that the disaffiliation proposal before the body at the time as part of the Traditional Plan legislation had already been [declared unconstitutional and on several points illegal](#) by the Judicial Council. So, to provide for any process for disaffiliation while retaining local church property, Traditionalist leaders moved the substitution of this provision. After debate, the substituted motion was approved 420-390. The [Judicial Council subsequently affirmed its constitutionality](#) when applied with the requirement in 2529.1.b.3 that the annual conference must provide final consent to enact a disaffiliation. Paragraph 2553 remains the only paragraph in the Discipline authorizing a process for a local church to disaffiliate while retaining its property and assets.

Meanwhile, a few annual conferences had also specified Paragraph 2548.2 as an option for disaffiliation in some way. Two in particular who had done so (Texas and Rio Texas) have now modified their policy documents to remove references to Paragraph 2548.2 as a disaffiliation pathway.

12. About to change its statement on abortion from life-centered to pro-choice?

No. It is true that [revised Social Principles](#) have been submitted for consideration by the next General Conference. However, the revisions made to the section addressing abortion do not alter the life-centered approach of The United Methodist Church on abortion.

“Tragic conflicts of life with life” remain the only circumstances in which abortion is considered justifiable in the revised statement. [No legislative proposals](#) submitted to the next General Conference call for any other or any lesser standard.

There is no basis to conclude the 2024 General Conference will make any change to the denomination’s life-centered commitments regarding abortion.

13. Allowing local churches that refuse to pay apportionments (as the Wesleyan Covenant Association is now directing) to “get away with it”?

No. The Book of Discipline states: “Payment in full of these apportionments by local churches is the first benevolent responsibility of the church” (Paragraph 247.14).

If the local church is incapable of fulfilling its first benevolent duty, this begins to call into question whether it remains viable as a local church or whether it is in a position to afford the appointment or appointments it may currently have.

The decision about how to respond to such situations lies with each district superintendent. District superintendents know and, as pastors themselves, can relate to the financial pressures some congregations may face that limit their ability to pay their apportionments in full, or sometimes, at all.

District superintendents also understand the difference between hardship and refusal. The Discipline gives them the tools to respond accordingly.

In cases where congregations are refusing to pay all or part of their apportionments, the district superintendent may take any of the following actions.

1. *Require review of the local church's potential (Paragraph 213) as a United Methodist congregation.* Is the congregation serving the purpose or able to serve the purpose for which it was organized if it refuses to pay apportionments? If the conclusion of the review is that it is not, the DS, with the district board of location and building, the bishop, and a majority of the cabinet, can recommend the closure of that local church at the next session of the annual conference (Paragraph 2549.1.a, 2.b).

2. *Re-align the pastoral charge (Paragraph 419.9) in consultation with the bishop.* For churches with multiple appointed clergy, this could involve making fewer appointments. For churches with one clergy, it could lead to a less than fulltime appointment.

3. *Recommend, with the approval of the district committee on location and building, the bishop, and the majority of the cabinet, the immediate transfer of all property and assets of the congregation to the conference board of trustees (Paragraph 2549.3.b).* In this situation, the conference board of trustees would have discretion about whether, and on what terms, to offer the property and assets to the congregation for its possible future use, or to offer the property to another buyer and direct the assets for the use of the annual conference.

Any of these actions could be taken in response to any congregation, *regardless* of its interest in disaffiliation, which *refuses* to pay its apportionments in full. None of these actions would be taken as a means to discourage or punish congregations simply seeking to disaffiliate. Every bishop in the United Methodist Church in the United States is committed to supporting congregations wishing to disaffiliate to do so in accordance with the policies set by that conference's board of trustees. United Methodist congregations are free to pursue disaffiliation. They are not free to sabotage the ongoing ministry of The United Methodist Church as they do so.

14. Allowing congregations that disaffiliate to retain their current appointed pastor or deacon?

The answer depends on whether the current clergy disaffiliate as well.

United Methodist bishops are authorized to appoint clergy to United Methodist congregations.

When a congregation is disaffiliated, it is no longer a United Methodist congregation. Thus, United Methodist appointments to a congregation that disaffiliates terminate on the effective date of disaffiliation as set by the annual conference.

If the current clergy disaffiliate with the congregation, it is up to the congregation or decisions by a denomination it may join whether the current clergy continue to serve them. United Methodist deacons and local pastors may or may not be accepted as clergy by other denominations. It is more likely that United Methodist elders may be.

If the current clergy remain United Methodist, they will no longer be appointed to the disaffiliated congregation and can no longer function as clergy for them. The United Methodist bishop will seek to appoint these clergy elsewhere as soon as possible. The congregation will need to seek new clergy leadership.

15. Ending United Methodist Church memberships of those whose local church disaffiliates?

Yes. When a local church disaffiliates, the Judicial Council has made clear all of its members depart the denomination with it. "Disaffiliation... under ¶2553 involves *both* church membership *and* property... the membership departs from The United Methodist Church" ([Decision 1449, Question 5](#)). From the standpoint of The United Methodist Church, it is not possible to be a member in The United Methodist Church and a member in another denomination (or an independent church) at the same time ([Paragraph 241](#) of the 2016 Book of Discipline).

So if your congregation has voted to disaffiliate, and you wish to remain a member of The United Methodist Church, you will want to find another United Methodist congregation to join *before* the effective date of disaffiliation set by the annual conference. You may ask your district office for assistance in this process.

16. Permitting 10% of the professing members of a local church to sidestep conference requirements that a request for a called charge conference to vote on disaffiliation come from

a church council or other leadership body of a local church?

No. But to understand the answer to that question, it is important to understand how this allegation could have been made.

[Paragraph 248](#) of the 2016 Book of Discipline states that a church conference “may be called” by the district superintendent under several circumstances, including in response to “a written request to the district superintendent by ... 10% of the professing membership of the local church.” The key language here is “may.” Receiving a request from 10% of the professing membership does not compel the district superintendent to call a church conference.

Meanwhile, many conference disaffiliation processes require a church council or other leadership body to make the request for a called church conference for disaffiliation. [Paragraph 2553.4](#) states “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.”

Each conference’s board of trustees sets the terms and conditions for its conference. The role of the district superintendents in that process is advisory only. Once the trustees set the terms and conditions, only they can alter them. The annual conference may provide additional standard terms. Where the terms and conditions from the trustees or additional standard terms set by the conference state that the contact to initiate a called church conference must come from the church council or equivalent leadership or administrative body, the district superintendent is bound to schedule called church conferences *only* for those requests that come through that channel.

And if the terms and conditions are not that specific, the district superintendent, per Paragraph 248, retains discretion about whether and when to call for the church conference. Paragraph 2553 simply notes the called church conference must occur within 120 days of the time at which the district superintendent calls for it. In all cases, the district superintendent has the authority to call a church conference. The local church does not.

17. Asking all local churches to vote on whether to remain in The United Methodist Church or join the Global Methodist Church?

No.

No leaders in The United Methodist Church are asking or expecting any United Methodist congregation to take any vote on this question. Congregations may choose to do so. But nothing compels any United Methodist congregation to hold such a vote.

Some local churches have taken the initiative to seek disaffiliation themselves. Many local churches are also being urged to disaffiliate by other organizations, such as the Wesleyan Covenant Association, that are not part of the structure of The United Methodist Church.

If a congregation wants to consider disaffiliation and follows the conference's process to request a called church conference for a vote, the only question at that called church conference will be whether that local church approves a motion to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church.

The called church conference will not consider the question of whether to join any other denomination.

Ask The UMC has received many questions from individuals who tell us they are being told they *must* choose between The UMC and the GMC. This is simply false.

A successful vote for disaffiliation is just that. It is a vote to request disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church. That is all.

That vote does not complete the process of disaffiliation. The local church still has to complete the preliminary terms in a disaffiliation agreement it signs with the conference, be approved by the conference for disaffiliation, and fulfill any remaining terms in the disaffiliation agreement that can only be addressed after annual conference approval, all by the effective date of disaffiliation specified by the conference.

But once a congregation has completed this process, it is, from the standpoint of The United Methodist Church, an independent congregation. It may choose to remain independent. Or it may choose to join any other network, association, or denomination that is willing to receive it under the terms that network, association, or denomination may set. The choices are many, not limited solely to the Global Methodist Church.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association created the Global Methodist Church. It is not surprising that it would urge United Methodist congregations to disaffiliate and join their new denomination. But this is far from the only choice a disaffiliating congregation may make. No vote on disaffiliation should be understood as a forced choice between The United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church.

18. Allowing clergy and laypersons elected as delegates to General or Jurisdictional Conference to serve if they have disaffiliated?

No.

The General Conference is the ultimate legislative body of The United Methodist Church. The Jurisdictional Conferences are the bodies that elect the executive branch of the denomination, the bishops. One must be a clergy or lay member of The United Methodist Church to serve as a delegate to the General or Jurisdictional conferences. The only exception to this is that the four Methodist denominations with whom The United Methodist Church has a concordat relationship may send delegates to our General Conference, and we to theirs. See Paragraph 13 of the 2016 Book of Discipline (Section II, Article I of the Constitution of The United Methodist Church).

When United Methodist clergy disaffiliate, they are no longer clergy members of their conferences. When local churches disaffiliate, all of their members are removed from the professing membership of The United Methodist Church as of the effective date of disaffiliation set by the annual conference. If persons in these congregations wish to remain part of The United Methodist Church, they must transfer their membership to a United Methodist Church that is not disaffiliating. Disaffiliated persons, lay or clergy, cannot serve as delegates to General or Jurisdictional Conference.

General Conference has provided a means to replace persons who, subsequent to election, can no longer serve as delegates. Those next in order of election take their place, and others move up to take the place of those until all jurisdictional reserve delegates are used. See Paragraphs 34-36 of the 2016 Book of Discipline (Section VI, Articles III-V of the Constitution).

19. Failing to punish those who violate the Discipline?

We have received this question, in roughly this form, many times.

The wording of the question reflects a lack of understanding of the purpose and the process of the complaint process of The United Methodist Church.

The purpose of the complaint process is to stop harms, if they have happened, and bring as much restoration as possible to the persons and situations involved in an alleged violation. The purpose is not to punish offenders.

The complaint process begins with someone filing a written complaint alleging one or more chargeable offenses ([Paragraph 2702](#)) with the proper persons (depending on whether the one alleged in the complaint is a layperson, a clergy person who is not a bishop, or a bishop). Next, the complaint is investigated to determine whether it merits moving to adjudication or dismissal. If the case moves to adjudication, the matter may be addressed through a just resolution agreement (at any time) or proceed to a trial. At a trial, the presiding officer is a district superintendent for laity, and a bishop for clergy or other bishops. The jury is made up of peers. The jury determines whether the charges apply in the case, and, if so, what action to take in response. With one exception, there are and never have been mandatory penalties. The one exception is clergy who are found guilty of having presided at a same-sex marriage or union ceremony. Otherwise, the jury determines the most appropriate remedy to stop harms and bring about as much restoration as possible.

Complaint processes, by design, are confidential. The intention is to protect the integrity and dignity of all parties involved from the beginning of a case to its conclusion. You may not hear that there was a complaint filed, how a particular case is proceeding, or even, necessarily, how it was resolved. That does not mean that nothing was done. It means that if a complaint was filed, the case is proceeding with the confidentiality all parties deserve.

20. Forcing or going to force congregations that do not want a self-avowed practicing homosexual as a pastor or deacon to accept one?

No.

First of all, it remains a chargeable offense in The United Methodist Church to be a clergyperson or candidate for the clergy who is a self-avowed, practicing homosexual. Bishops are forbidden to appoint those found through the complaint process to be self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. This has been the case since 1984.

To be sure, as we noted in [Part 2, Question 10](#) of this series, some of these rules are unevenly enforced in some places. But in most U.S. conferences, these policies have been consistently enforced from their beginning. The result has been either no self-avowed, practicing homosexual clergy remaining in the conference, or, if there are any, once charges are brought and a finding of guilt determined, their ability to be appointed is at an end. In short, these policies have been very effective at keeping self-avowed, practicing homosexuals out of the clergy pool of The UMC or removing them from it.

Thus, the likelihood that any congregation in most conferences could receive a self-avowed, practicing homosexual person as its pastor or deacon is close to zero. And in the conferences from whom we have received this question most frequently, it is zero.

Finally, bishops already work to appoint clergy to congregations for a match that is likely to work for years to come. Should the Discipline at some point in the future permit self-avowed, practicing homosexuals to serve as clergy, bishops are most likely to appoint them to congregations where they would be welcomed and avoid appointing them where they would not.

21. Letting churches in multi-point charges retain their property, including parsonages, if the local church that actually owns the parsonage disaffiliates?

Yes.

Local churches in The United Methodist Church own their property while also holding it in trust for the annual conference. Charges are not legal entities, and so do not hold title to property as such. Local churches do.

When a local church disaffiliates under ¶2553, it takes with it all of its property, including any parsonages to which it holds title. While it is possible for it to choose for whatever reason not to do so, nothing compels a church owning such property to release it as part of its disaffiliation. This is true even if it is part of a multi-church charge in which the parsonage of the disaffiliating church provides housing for the clergy appointed to all of the churches in the charge.

So what is a charge to do if the church that owns the parsonage for its clergy departs, taking that parsonage? This is a matter for the district superintendent to resolve under the superintendent's duty to establish and re-align charges (¶419.9 of the 2016 Book of Discipline). The remaining church or churches in the charge do not need to resolve this themselves. The district superintendent can create a new multi-point charge that is able to provide for the housing of the appointed clergy.

22. Telling local churches considering disaffiliation not to seek legal counsel?

No.

Competent legal counsel may be very helpful throughout the disaffiliation process. Every annual conference supports and encourages congregations to seek legal counsel when it may be helpful to understand the legal implications of disaffiliation and to make a smooth transition if the church disaffiliates.

Local churches considering disaffiliation should seek legal counsel if they have endowments, trusts or donor-directed funds they manage themselves or that are under management by others (such as foundations, see below). While the disaffiliation process described in the Book of Discipline may enable disaffiliating local churches to retain their assets, law governing the management of endowments, trusts and donor-directed funds may not. It depends on the legal language that created the endowment, trust or donor-directed funds in question. Legal counsel can provide important insight to local churches about whether or how they may retain or benefit from such funds should they disaffiliate.

Disaffiliating churches may also find legal counsel helpful in creating and filing new incorporation paperwork, obtaining new 501(c)3 letters, and revising their deeds once they are approved for disaffiliation.

Annual conferences do discourage seeking *adversarial* legal counsel who may offer to file lawsuits against the annual conference or claim they may have workarounds to the disaffiliation processes laid out by the Discipline and conference policies to enact them. There is little merit to such claims, and courts have almost always sided with United Methodist annual conferences in such cases. Conference advice against pursuing such counsel is to protect the interest not only of the conference, but also of disaffiliating local churches that may only experience net financial losses through associating themselves with such counsel.

23. Prohibiting disaffiliating local churches and United Methodist individuals from retaining assets in United Methodist foundations and credit unions?

No.

The United Methodist Church has no legal means to make any such prohibitions.

United Methodist-related foundations and credit unions are independently incorporated non-profit entities. They are governed by their own rules and membership agreements, as well as by their articles of incorporation and how corporation law works where they are incorporated.

These matters work a bit differently for foundations as opposed to credit unions. Let's take each in turn.

How relationships may continue between a United Methodist-related foundation and a given individual or church that has disaffiliated from The United Methodist Church can vary. Three major factors influence what these relationships may be.

One is the articles of incorporation of the foundation. A foundation may be bound by its articles of incorporation to serve only United Methodist-related entities with some or all of their services. Generally, there may be limitations on financial services, such as investment management, they may continue to offer to non-United Methodist entities. At the same time, again, depending on their articles of incorporation, they may be able to offer other kinds of services, such as education about charitable giving, to anyone. Because each foundation has its own articles of incorporation, churches considering disaffiliation and that use a United Methodist related foundation will want to contact their foundation to find out what services the church may continue to expect should it disaffiliate so the church may plan accordingly.

A second factor is law governing endowments, trusts or other donor-directed funds a foundation may manage. If those endowments or trusts have clauses that revert the assets under management to the foundation itself or the United Methodist annual conference should the congregation cease to remain United Methodist or that state the assets and/or its proceeds are to be used solely for the benefit of The United Methodist Church, the foundation is required under law to honor those directives. It cannot permit these assets to return to the control of a local church that disaffiliates from The United Methodist Church. Similarly, if the local church is legally closed as a corporation as part of the disaffiliation agreement (as occurs in some conferences), any endowments, trusts or other donor-restricted funds under management may not legally be transferable to the control of the disaffiliated church. The same applies for any endowments, trusts or donor-restricted funds directly under the management of the local church as noted above (see question 22).

What does this mean for disaffiliating local churches? First, it means the existing relationship with a United Methodist foundation may change should the local church disaffiliate. The church will want to ask its trustees to contact the foundation and obtain a written response about the implications of disaffiliation. And second, it means the local church cannot assume it will be legally able to retain some or all of these assets either under the management of others or by the disaffiliated congregation itself. It depends on the legal language creating the endowment or trust or the donor restrictions attached to the funds under management. It also depends on what the disaffiliation agreement with the conference requires. To address these matters, the church may want to seek competent legal counsel.

Under federal law, persons who have become part of a credit union because they met its membership requirements at one time cannot be removed from membership in that credit union because they may no longer meet those criteria at a later time. So, if you joined a United Methodist-related credit union created to serve members of The

United Methodist Church, but later the church disaffiliated or you joined a church of another denomination, you may remain a full member of that credit union as long as you wish.

However, if you seek to join a United Methodist credit union as a new member after your congregation has disaffiliated, or if you yourself were otherwise no longer part of The United Methodist Church at the time of your application, you may or may not be eligible. To join a credit union, one must meet its qualifications for membership at the time of seeking to join it. Depending on the membership agreement of a given United Methodist-related credit union, someone who is not a member of a United Methodist church may or may not be considered as qualified to join it. Some credit unions may be able to consider such applicants on a case by case basis, but nothing may require them to grant membership. This will vary by credit union.

So those who are currently members of a United Methodist-related credit union may retain their membership permanently, regardless of whether their local church disaffiliates. However, for the sake of those who are not yet members of it, the local church will want to contact the credit union to learn whether or under what conditions members of the congregation may become members of the credit union at a point in time after the local church disaffiliates.

24. Ending scholarships for students who are members of local churches who disaffiliate, or who may disaffiliate themselves?

It depends on who sets the terms of the scholarships and how they choose to respond.

In all cases, students who are receiving United Methodist-related scholarships-- whether from an annual conference, a general agency, or a United Methodist-related college, university or seminary-- will want to contact the provider of the scholarship to learn how disaffiliation or otherwise leaving The United Methodist Church will impact eligibility to apply for or continue to receive the scholarship or scholarships in question.

In the case of Ministerial Education Funds, the Book of Discipline limits eligibility to certified candidates for ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church. If you are a certified candidate and the local church where you hold professing membership intends to disaffiliate, you will want to move your membership to a local United Methodist church that is not disaffiliating from The United Methodist Church. If you remain a member of a church that disaffiliates, your candidacy for ordination in The United Methodist Church ends as of the effective date of disaffiliation. This also means your eligibility to apply for or continue to receive Ministerial Education Funds to support your seminary education has ended.

25. Allowing annual conferences and their boards of trustees to set their own terms for disaffiliation over and above those set forth in Paragraph 2553?

The answer is yes.

From Paragraph 2553.4:

"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"

From Paragraph 2553.4.a:

"Annual conferences may develop additional standard terms that are not inconsistent with the standard form of this paragraph."

The result of these two statements is that disaffiliation policies vary widely from conference to conference.

There are some conferences, such as South Carolina, that interpret the language of Paragraph 2553 literally and find that few, if any, congregations in the conference can qualify under those terms. At stake is the fact that Paragraph 2553 creates a *limited* right for disaffiliation. One of the limits is time. The provisions of the paragraph expire on December 31, 2023. The other limit is purpose. Paragraph 2553 limits the purpose of disaffiliation under its terms solely as a remedy for those congregations disturbed by the *changes* made to policies regarding homosexual practice, marriage, and ordination by the 2019 General Conference, or "by action or inaction of its annual conference related to these issues which follow." The South Carolina Conference has fully implemented the changes. This means, per the interpretation of the leadership of that conference, that traditionalist congregations in South Carolina have no basis to claim either of the opportunities for disaffiliation offered by Paragraph 2553.

Most conferences have instructed their trustees to consider requests for disaffiliation a bit more broadly, either by allowing for disaffiliation because of any matter of conscience regarding homosexuality, or, in some cases, for nearly any reason, provided all other terms set by the Discipline and the conference are met.

Most conferences have also required that congregations enter a process of discernment prior to requesting a called charge conference for a vote on disaffiliation. The length and the expected content of such discernment processes also vary by annual conference.

A few conferences, such as California-Pacific, Illinois Great Rivers, and Baltimore-Washington, have required payments for some percentage of the local church's property value in addition to the payments named in the Book of Discipline as a condition of disaffiliation.

To date, where added conditions have been challenged and bishops have been requested to issue Decisions of Law regarding the appropriateness of these additions, the Judicial Council has consistently supported findings by bishops that the conference's additions were in keeping with the requirements of the Discipline.

26. No longer providing coverage under the settlement agreement with Boy Scouts of America for UMC congregations that disaffiliate?

The answer is complicated.

Here are the key facts.

1. The Boy Scouts of America bankruptcy can **only** resolve scouting-related claims that involve allegations of abuse occurring **prior to February 18, 2020**, which is the date the petition for bankruptcy was filed. The settlement negotiated by the United Methodist Ad Hoc Committee does not distinguish between claims that involve a current or former United Methodist church.

The settlement agreement covers no claims for any United Methodist or disaffiliating congregation for alleged abuse that happened after February 18, 2020.

2. Protection for UMC congregations after February 18, 2020 is provided in part by the changed nature of the agreement a local church enters into with the Boy Scouts of America. United Methodist congregations may extend their current charters and be protected from harm under Boy Scout coverages through the end of 2022 for claims of events between February 18 to the end of 2022.

3. After that time, all UMC congregations are generally expected to shift to a Facility Use and Indemnity Agreement or an Affiliation Agreement that will provide ongoing legal liability protection for United Methodist local churches.

Details about the settlement and regularly updated documents for United Methodist congregations can be [found here](#).

If your congregation disaffiliates, your leadership will want to consult an attorney with expertise in these matters or, if your congregation joins a different denomination, with that denomination for guidance on whether and how to continue to structure your relationship with the Boy Scouts of America. To date, the Global Methodist Church has not published any information on its website relating to its plans or processes for managing these relationships.

27. Requiring retired clergy who hold charge conference membership in churches that vote to request disaffiliation to move their charge conference membership?

Yes, mostly.

What makes this "mostly" rather than a firm yes is the nature of membership retired clergy have.

They do not become professing members in a local church. They retain their membership in that sense in the clergy session of the annual conference.

Instead they take a seat in a charge conference, and become active in a local church that is part of that charge and have most of the rights of professing membership in that local church. (See Paragraph 357.5 of the 2016 Book of

Discipline).

The key here is that church and charge may overlap, but are not necessarily entirely identical.

If the charge is one local church, charge and church are, in effect, both overlapping and identical. If a church on a one-point charge votes to request disaffiliation, this means that charge is going to disaffiliate as well. The same is true if every local church on a multi-point charge votes to request disaffiliation.

In these cases the retired clergyperson should promptly contact the district office, request a list of charges that are not disaffiliating, and choose among these the charge conference in which to take a seat and the congregation in which to become an active participant. This transfer needs to happen before the effective date of disaffiliation of the charge as set by the annual conference.

In multi-point charges where not all of the congregations on the charge request disaffiliation, however, the charge conference and the local churches overlap but are not identical. One or more congregations may disaffiliate, but those that remain are still, at least at that time, part of the same charge. In this situation, the retired clergyperson may become active in one of the non-disaffiliating churches in the charge while retaining membership in the same charge conference. This requires simple notice to the district superintendent of which church the clergyperson will participate in. It does not require a transfer to another charge at that time.

28. Saying that Paragraph 2553 does not apply in the central conferences?

Yes.

After it was supported by the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, the 2019 General Conference [approved a petition](#) from the Committee on a Way Forward that legislation passed at the 2019 General Conference would not become effective in the central conferences until 12 months after the close of the 2020 General Conference.

The 2020 General Conference has since been postponed until 2024.

Thus, none of the legislation passed by the 2019 General Conference is effective in the central conferences. This includes all of the Traditional Plan legislation, as well as the disaffiliation process authorized by Paragraph 2553.

29. Providing for a “disaffiliation bridge” between the end of 2023, when Paragraph 2553 expires, until whatever process the 2024 General Conference may approve becomes effective?

The United Methodist Church, as such, is not doing this because, in fact, it cannot. For United Methodists in the United States, the only place where Paragraph 2553 applies, only General Conference can set or alter the Book of Discipline.

However, four annual conferences have created alternative paths for disaffiliation beyond 2023 built on a different paragraph of the Book of Discipline, [Paragraph 2549](#), and more specifically, [Paragraph 2549.3.b](#).

Under the terms of this paragraph, when the bishop, the majority of the district superintendents and the appropriate district board of location and building agree that “exigent circumstances exist that require the immediate protection of the local church’s property,” they may direct that the property and all assets of the local church be immediately vested in the conference board of trustees, which then becomes responsible for managing it or its disposal. A commitment to disaffiliate represents such an “exigent circumstance.”

Four annual conferences or their trustees (South Georgia, Rio Texas, South Carolina, and Alabama-West Florida) have taken actions that instruct their respective conference boards of trustees how to proceed when congregations seek to disaffiliate but Paragraph 2553 is no longer available or deemed not applicable.

In [South Georgia](#), [Rio Texas](#) and [Alabama-West Florida](#) conferences, either the conference (South Georgia) or its board of trustees (Rio Texas, Alabama-West Florida) has directed that the same policies in place for implementing Paragraph 2553 be used to address churches seeking to disaffiliate after Dec. 31, 2023, and completing the process no later than Dec. 31, 2024. The Alabama-West Florida trustees will also seek affirmation for their policy at the 2023 annual conference session.

In [South Carolina](#), the bishop and conference leadership had previously determined, through a strict reading of Paragraph 2553, that no congregations in the conference qualify for disaffiliation under the terms of that paragraph. The congregations in South Carolina do not disagree with the changes made to legislation affecting gay and lesbian persons adopted by the 2019 General Conference, and the conference itself has implemented all such changes without objection. Thus, no congregations in that conference qualify under Paragraph 2553 to disaffiliate, and thus, also, the South Carolina Conference had not adopted a separate process to enable disaffiliation under that paragraph.

In December 2022, [Bishop L. Jonathan Holston](#) announced a “[Local Church Discernment Process](#)” built around Paragraph 2549. This process looks roughly parallel to the ways many other annual conferences have created their own implementation processes for Paragraph 2553. As in many other conferences, there is a required initial discernment period, a called church conference at which two-thirds of the professing members present must affirm a request to disaffiliate, a schedule of payments to be made (in this case prior to the church conference vote) and final approval by the annual conference. In addition to the payments set by Paragraph 2553, those seeking disaffiliation in South Carolina must also pay 10 percent of the appraised value of all church property and liquid assets and all unpaid salary and benefits due to the appointed clergy. Congregations must have completed payments and the church conference by March 1 each year to be approved at the subsequent annual conference in June. Unlike the other three, this policy is designed to remain in effect beyond 2024.

30. Going to extend the life of Paragraph 2553 at the next General Conference?

There are two answers: Not as such, and we do not know.

First, not as such. Only General Conference can alter the Discipline. General Conference does not meet until 2024, at which point Paragraph 2553 will in effect not exist, since it set its provisions to expire Dec. 31, 2023. It is not possible to “extend” a paragraph that does not exist. Thus, if anything like Paragraph 2553 is to be approved at the General Conference, it would be new legislation, not an actual extension of then-current legislation.

Second, we do not know. To date, the General Conference has not received legislation that would have the effect of re-enacting Paragraph 2553 as it currently exists but with a different expiration date. It is possible the General Conference could receive such a proposal. It would also be possible for delegates to the General Conference to propose and adopt such itself. Whether either of those two things will happen remains to be seen.

31. Prohibiting congregations from disaffiliating under Paragraph 2553?

The United Methodist Church as a denomination has not done so.

Two annual conferences in the United States (the only place where Paragraph 2553 applies) have done so, for different reasons.

In South Carolina, conference leadership — including their trustees — have concluded that no congregation qualifies for disaffiliation under the provisions of Paragraph 2553. That paragraph sets two possible qualifications to establish a right to request disaffiliation. The first is that the congregation disagrees with the changes made by the 2019 special called General Conference to legislation related to homosexual persons. However, congregations in South Carolina agree with those changes. The other qualification would be if, by action or inaction, the annual conference failed to implement those changes. The South Carolina conference has implemented them fully. Thus, no congregations in the South Carolina conference can qualify to disaffiliate under the terms of Paragraph 2553. As noted in [Part 8](#) of this series ([Question 29](#)), the South Carolina conference has instead implemented an [alternate set of policies](#) for disaffiliation grounded in a different paragraph.

In [North Georgia](#), the degree of misinformation and defamatory statements used to inform votes for disaffiliation led the conference board of trustees to determine “it is no longer confident it could recommend in good faith disaffiliation agreements to the Annual Conference at this time.” Since recommendation for disaffiliation comes from the conference board of trustees to the annual conference, and since the annual conference must approve disaffiliations before they can take place, the effect of this determination by the conference board of trustees is to halt the process of disaffiliation under Paragraph 2553 in that conference.

These are the only two conferences in The United Methodist Church that have taken such steps to date.

32. Going to appoint non-disaffiliating clergy elsewhere should the congregation(s) they serve disaffiliate?

Yes, as positions are available.

However, availability may not be immediate in all cases depending on when the effective date of disaffiliation falls in the regular appointment cycle. Provisional, associate and full clergy members of the conference displaced by a disaffiliating congregation may need to enter transitional leave for a time. Clergy of other denominations serving under appointment by a United Methodist bishop retain their credentials from their own denomination but are not eligible for transitional leave. Displaced local pastors will be without license until they are appointed again.

33. Allowing congregations to re-vote if their church conference vote to request disaffiliation failed to reach the mandatory two-thirds majority?

For the most part, no.

The Book of Discipline does not provide for a re-vote on this question. Exceptions may be made at the discretion of the district superintendent if there is evidence that an irregularity in the process of the original vote may have led to a different outcome.

A failed disaffiliation vote is generally the worst of all possible outcomes. The failed vote tends to create angry and hurting people on both sides, more of whom are likely to leave the church, or simply drop out, than if no vote had happened or if the motion to request disaffiliation had prevailed. Those who do not leave often feel demoralized as they watch the fallout of the failed vote unfold. Asking a congregation in this condition to hold another vote is more likely to increase polarization, dropouts and departures than bring the resolution those asking for a vote may seek.

So as hard as a failed vote is on a congregation, there is wisdom in the fact the Discipline does not provide for a re-vote on this matter.

If your congregation has experienced a failed re-vote, seek support from your district superintendent and conference staff to find pathways toward healing, reconciliation and, in time, renewed focus on the mission of the congregation that remains.

34. Teaching things in its seminaries that are contrary to the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church?

Yes, but not to undermine United Methodist doctrinal standards.

Indeed, the reason for doing this is exactly the opposite.

In the real world where United Methodist church members live, all kinds of beliefs, including some that are contrary to the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church, not only exist but are strongly defended by their advocates. Those preparing to be clergy in The United Methodist Church need to know that other doctrines exist, what they are, and how to articulate and support United Methodist doctrines in the face of them so they can help those they serve do the same.

35. Going to require local churches to host same-sex weddings? What if their appointed clergy are allowed to and willing to do so?

No. And no.

There are no proposals before the next General Conference to require local congregations to host same-sex weddings or union ceremonies, not even if their appointed clergy are permitted and willing to do so. Existing proposals would allow clergy to choose about presiding and congregations to choose about hosting, but neither would have control over the other's choices.

36. Endorsing critical race theory or about to endorse it?

No. The United Methodist Church has never made any statements about critical race theory. Nor have any such statements been submitted for consideration by the next General Conference (2024).

The United Methodist Church has stood firmly against the sin of racism in all its forms (interpersonal, corporate and systemic) from its founding in 1968. These commitments pre-date the development of critical race theory in law school curricula beginning in the 1980s.

37. Requiring that only professing members of the local church, and all professing members of the local church, are eligible to vote on a motion to disaffiliate at a called church conference?

Yes and yes, subject only to different rulings by annual conferences within their ability to setting specific terms provided under Paragraph 2553. (South Georgia Conference has ruled differently).

Paragraph 2553.3 states “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.”

This appears to means two things (and another we’ll address in the next question).

First, *only* professing members of the local church have vote on this question. Clergy, affiliate members, associate members and persons who are baptized but have not become professing members do not have vote. Only professing members of that particular local church do according to the language of this paragraph. Again, some bishops or conference trustees may rule otherwise under the authority given to bishops to determine matters of law under Paragraph 419.10 and to conference trustees by Paragraph 2533.4 of the Discipline.

Second, *all* professing members present at the meeting have vote. There is no distinction here between “active” or “inactive.” There is no additional provision about being “in good standing.” Indeed, none of those terms applies to lay members of local United Methodist congregations in the local church membership categories set by the General Conference. Persons either are professing members of the local church or they are not. All persons on the rolls of the local church as professing members are eligible to attend the called church conference and vote, even if they moved far away 30 years ago, and have neither attended nor provided any support to your congregation during that time or longer. If they are still on your rolls as professing members, they are eligible to attend the called church conference and vote on this question.

This is why we find these words in the same section of Paragraph 2533: “[S]pecial 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” (emphasis added).

38. Requiring that persons be present at the church conference in order to have vote on a motion to disaffiliate?

Yes.

As noted above, Paragraph 2553.3 states, “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” (emphasis added).

This paragraph makes no provision for proxy votes for persons not at the meeting. Either one is present at the meeting or one does not have vote.

39. Counting votes to abstain as votes against the motion to disaffiliate?

The Discipline nowhere speaks about how to handle abstention as part of a voting process.

So the answer depends either on rulings from the annual conference or on the version of *Roberts Rules of Order* being used.

The current [12th edition](#) specifies that when there are voting requirements based on the number of members present (as in this case), an abstention can function as a negative vote. This is because in these instances, per *Robert's* (12th Edition), the total number of votes to be counted is based on the total number of eligible voters (professing members) present at the meeting at the time of the vote. However, in *Robert's Rules of Order in Plain English*, and in several previous versions of *Robert's Rules*, a vote to abstain is simply not counted as a vote at all. Thus, different conferences may rule differently on this matter. South Georgia, following the 12th Edition, counts abstentions as, in effect, negative votes, as one case in point. It appears a number of annual conference chancellors are advising in accordance with the 12th edition. However, a final ruling on this matter would rest with the bishop or the conference board of trustees.

To be clear, some conferences do not list abstention as an option on the ballot. The ballot requires a yes or no vote on the question of whether to request disaffiliation. The option to abstain does not appear on the ballot. Abstaining is still possible in theory, but it would involve turning in a blank ballot. Blank ballots function as abstentions, and thus how to count them depends on the version of *Robert's Rules* and the ruling of the bishop or the conference board of trustees.

In conferences where abstention is listed as an option on the ballot, and where the plain English version or some previous versions are used, the vote to abstain has the same effect as not turning in a ballot at all or turning in a blank ballot. That ballot is not counted toward the total of eligible ballots cast (subject to different readings by the conference).

So, let's say that the conference uses the plain English version, and out of the 100 professing members present, 60 ballots are marked in favor of the motion to request disaffiliation, 30 ballots are marked against the motion, and 10 ballots are left blank or marked as abstentions. The total of ballots cast is 90. Sixty votes are needed to reach a 2/3 majority to pass the motion. The motion prevails.

Similarly, let us say out of 100 one hundred professing members present, 59 ballots are marked in favor of the motion to disaffiliate, 30 ballots are marked against, and 11 are left blank or marked as abstentions. The total of ballots cast is 89. Sixty votes are still needed to reach a 2/3 majority to pass the motion. The motion fails.

Thus, even when votes to abstain do not count toward the total of votes to be considered, we see in this example how they may affect the outcome. The shift of one vote from yes to abstain changed the result from approving to rejecting a request for disaffiliation.

In the case where the 12th edition is being followed, however, the outcomes would be different.

In the first case (60 ballots for, 30 against, 10 abstentions), the total number of ballots to be considered is 100. This requires 67 votes to reach the 2/3 majority required to pass the motion. The motion fails. For the same reason, the motion also fails in the second instance (67 votes are still required).

To consider the effect on a closer vote, if there are 100 votes, 66 for, 33 against, and 1 abstention, the abstention means that the required 2/3 majority *of those present* (67) is still not reached, and so the motion fails.

40. Validating voters as eligible to vote?

Yes.

While this is done in different ways by different conferences, most require a church requesting a called church conference to send a list of all persons on the congregation's current roll of professing members to the district office as part of that request. As persons arrive to vote, they may be admitted into the place where the vote will be held only after they have been duly certified as being on the list provided by the church. What is required to establish identity may vary by annual conference. Once admitted to the voting area, certified voters may not be permitted to leave that area until all ballots are cast and collected.

If you have questions about the voter validation process in your conference, ask your district office.

41. Requiring a written, secret ballot?

Yes.

And the question to appear on the ballot, and in some instances a sample ballot, may be sent to each professing member as part of the requirement to notify all professing members of the time, date, location and topic to be considered at the called church conference at least 10 days in advance of the scheduled meeting.

42. Providing for the security of the ballots cast?

Yes.

While the exact procedures used to ensure the security of the ballots themselves may vary from conference to conference, the following process appears to be commonly followed.

Only ballots distributed at the meeting are used.

A count of the persons in the room is taken before the vote to validate the total of possible valid ballots that may be cast.

Ballots for the vote are distributed to the voters.

The ballots are collected and counted by persons designated by the district superintendent or by conference policy, with the result announced to the body at the conclusion of the count.

The collected ballots become the property of the annual conference as evidence of the result of the vote.

If you have questions about the process to ensure the security of the ballots in your conference, ask your district office.

43. Down over 20% relative to the number of congregations or members it had before disaffiliation began in 2019?

There are two answers to those questions. One is “not really.” The other is “we’re still tallying.”

First, the 20% figure that has been stated in many media outlets in recent weeks refers only to the percentage of churches in the United States that have disaffiliated. Disaffiliation is available only in the United States. United Methodists in the United States make up about half of all United Methodists worldwide, with U.S. congregations representing closer to two-thirds of all congregations in the denomination worldwide.

There were 30,541 United Methodist congregations in the United States as of 2019. U.S. annual conferences have approved 6,225 congregations for disaffiliation (as of August 5). This means about 20.4% of U.S. congregations have been approved for disaffiliation.

This baseline is official. The *actual* disaffiliations total, however, is not. And it may not be for some time. The General Council on Finance and Administration is responsible for collecting, collating and reporting the official statistics of The United Methodist Church. To do so, it depends on annual conferences sending them their statistical information, including churches disaffiliated, closed, merged, federated or otherwise no longer functioning as United Methodist congregations. Conferences report to GCFA at their own pace. Some may choose to delay reporting until after the conclusion of all special sessions and the submission of 2023 year-end statistics in the opening months of 2024.

Many conferences have sent their reporting of status changes for congregations fairly promptly. The same may not be the case for church membership statistics of the churches that have disaffiliated or otherwise changed status. Membership statistics may take longer to compile, and so it may be longer before conferences send membership statistics for GCFA to collate and report.

44. Mostly done with disaffiliations at this point?

The answer depends on the meaning of the term “mostly.”

The majority of the 53 annual conferences in the United States have completed the disaffiliation process entirely, either at or before the current regular sessions of this year’s annual conferences. There will be no more disaffiliations in these conferences.

However, 23 annual conferences have scheduled at least one special session to consider requests for disaffiliation between Aug. 5 and Dec. 9, 2023. Florida has scheduled two (Aug. 5 and Dec. 2).

Of these 23 conferences, five have seen fewer than 50 congregations disaffiliate to date. Two of these anticipate their first and only disaffiliations at their special called conferences later this year. Thirteen have had over 100 disaffiliations. Some have reason to anticipate substantial numbers. In North Georgia, for example, 186 congregations had filed a lawsuit whose outcome required the conference to schedule a special session to enable the conference to vote on their disaffiliation.

Thus, while the majority of conferences have completed the disaffiliation process, it is possible a substantial number of additional congregations may be disaffiliated by the end of 2023.

45. Unsure how many more churches will request disaffiliation in 2023?

Yes.

While the same paragraph in the Discipline governs all disaffiliations ([Paragraph 2553](#)), each annual conference has its own policies and deadlines for its disaffiliation process.

We know *when* annual conferences have scheduled their [additional special sessions for disaffiliation](#) through the end of 2023. Whether, when and how conferences publish how many churches are requesting disaffiliation varies widely by conference.

Some conferences require congregations requesting disaffiliation to have all relevant information to the conference office weeks or months in advance of the special session so this information can be published on the conference website well ahead of time. Some publish the number and names of churches requesting disaffiliation on their websites shortly before the special annual conference session. Others publish none of this in advance on their website, and instead send this information only to the voting members of the conference. Nearly all publish the number approved for disaffiliation soon after the special session.

At this point we know of 46 churches that are requesting disaffiliation in [Florida](#) and one in Oklahoma. The Dakotas Conference indicates it will post its [workbook](#) for its Aug. 15 special session on its website on Aug. 7. No other conferences with subsequent special sessions have published information about numbers or names of churches requesting disaffiliation.

So, at the time of this publication (early August 2023), we do not know and cannot accurately anticipate the total number of churches that will be presented or approved for disaffiliation in the subsequent special sessions this year.

46. Raising apportionments for the congregations that remain part of The United Methodist Church?

Generally speaking, no.

The number of congregations paying apportionments has decreased in many conferences because of disaffiliations. This does not mean the remaining congregations automatically pay more.

First, disaffiliating congregations pay two full years of apportionments (current year plus one more) to offset the conference's loss of their funds for the first year of their absence. This gives annual conferences a bit of a financial cushion and some time to consider how to reshape their ministries in light of a reduced number of congregations.

Second, each conference sets its own budget in its annual conference session. Each conference's council on finance and administration prepares a budget proposal it believes will ensure the mission of the conference can be accomplished while also being sustainable for the congregations of the conference. The conference council will not submit and the annual conference will not approve a budget either believes is not sustainable. This, in itself, creates a check on major increases in apportionments to local churches, regardless of the number of churches that may have disaffiliated or closed.

Third, conferences where the number disaffiliations has been the highest and the impact the greatest have already scaled back conference staffing and programming or are in the process of doing so. Many conferences are reducing and reorganizing districts to reduce costs. Some conferences anticipate being combined with other conferences following the 2024 sessions of the jurisdictional conferences. These reductions and realignments will also keep conference budgets in line with the number and financial capacity of their congregations.

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