
Basic Questions and Answers FAQ Related to Disaffiliation

I'm hearing a lot about Disaffiliation and Paragraph 2553. Is this the only path forward available to churches?

Certainly not! In fact, it should be clearly stated from the beginning that for most congregations and clergy in the Arkansas Conference, staying right where they are, right as they are as United Methodists will be the preferred path forward. Indeed, this is the default position for all of our congregations and clergy; no vote or other action is required to remain United Methodist. Other churches will want to wait until after the General Conference in 2024 before making any decisions, and this is an acceptable path as well. However, for many honest and honorable reasons, some of our congregations and clergy feel it is or may be time now to depart the UMC in order to explore paths more closely aligned to their current beliefs, whether that be to unite with another denomination or to go an independent route. Currently for these congregations disaffiliation, described in ¶2553 of the *2016 Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, as amended by the 2019 General Conference, is the only path ready to be used.

I have also heard about Paragraph 2548.2 as an available path for churches wanting to leave. Is this accurate?

Currently the Council of Bishop has submitted several questions to the Judicial Council to determine whether or not ¶2548.2 in our *2016 Book of Discipline* does indeed provide a way for churches to leave by deeding church property "...to one of the other denominations represented in the Pan-Methodist Commission or to another evangelical denomination under an allocation, exchange of property, or comity agreement." If the Judicial Council decides that ¶2548.2 can indeed be used, legislation to establish a comity agreement template and a set of guiding principles in order to guide the use of this paragraph will be considered by the next regular or special session of the Arkansas Annual Conference. If so approved by the annual conference, we will be ready to use ¶2548.2 as another path for congregations wanting to leave the UMC. Until then, disaffiliation is the only process ready to be used now by churches wanting to leave the UMC.

I have heard that it might be possible for an entire annual conference to disaffiliate. Is this true?

No. In [Decision 1444](#) the Judicial Council stated that absent General Conference legislation regulating the process and setting the conditions for an annual conference to leave, an annual conference may not disaffiliate from the UMC.

What then is Disaffiliation?

Disaffiliation is a process described in ¶2553 that allows a congregation to leave The United Methodist Church under very limited circumstances, namely: *"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."* The choice by a local church to disaffiliate with The United Methodist Church must be made in sufficient time for the process for exiting the denomination to be complete prior to December 31, 2023 when the provisions of ¶2553 are set to expire.

For churches considering the possibility of disaffiliation, what is the process that will be used in our conference?

Paragraph [2553](#) of our current *Book of Discipline* provides the overall framework that must be followed by any church in the United Methodist Church that wants to disaffiliate. During the 2021 Arkansas Annual Conference legislation was passed defining the specific process that will be used within the Arkansas Conference for congregations wishing to disaffiliate. A link to that document can be found [here](#).

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

Whether or not to pursue disaffiliation is ultimately up to the professing members of the local church, and there are several points at which they can make decisions. The initial request to pursue disaffiliation must come from the appropriate leadership body of the church. After a three-month period of discernment open to all members of the local

church, a majority of the professing members must show they are in favor of moving forward in the process. Then, at a duly called church conference (§248), two-thirds of the professing members present must vote in favor of disaffiliation. Finally, a simple majority of members present and voting at a regular or called session of the Arkansas Annual Conference is needed for final ratification of the disaffiliation.

When do we have to vote?

You do not have to vote. Neither the current disaffiliation language nor the May 1 formation of the Global Methodist Church (GMC) require any church or individual (lay or clergy) to vote on issues of disaffiliation unless they desire a change. In fact, many churches will likely wait to make any decisions at all until the 2024 General Conference, in order to see what new pathways might become available. By default, congregations not voting to disaffiliate will remain in the Arkansas Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Are there costs to a congregation pursuing disaffiliation?

While disaffiliation, as outlined in §2553, is a fair and straightforward process, there are some significant financial responsibilities associated with it. Although the actual costs will differ for each local church and circumstance, they will include the following:

- Payment of any unpaid conference tithe for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of conference tithe;
- Actual costs for transfer of title or other legal work;
- Remaining clergy salary support for the current appointive year (if applicable.)
- An amount equal to the local church's pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference as determined by the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits.
- Repayment of any district or annual conference grants made in the past ten years, excluding benevolence grants.

For a specific financial liability calculation for any individual local church, the church Trustee Chairperson, Church Council Chairperson or Pastor should contact Mr. Todd Burris, Director of the Arkansas Conference Center for Administrative Services, at tburris@arumc.org or (501) 324-8024.

Why does a disaffiliating church have to pay a share of “unfunded pension liability?”

The key to understanding a church's withdrawal liability is to recognize that the United Methodist Church has consistently maintained some form of “defined benefit” for clergy in all its pension plans, both present and past. In a defined benefit plan, the employer undertakes a promise to pay a set amount to a retiree for the rest of the retiree's life, and in some cases, for the rest of a spouse's life. Those plans are administered by Wespath Benefits & Investments, but they are funded by annual conferences and local churches. In order to pay for the expected future benefits, actuaries calculate the amount of money needed today using estimates of life expectancy, market rate of returns, average salary increases and other relative factors. If those returns do not meet the actuarial projections or if clergy live longer than expected, Wespath will be forced to turn to annual conferences to contribute more to the plans in order to meet the obligations to retirees. Utilizing market factors, Wespath estimates The Arkansas Conference's total unfunded liability for accrued pension benefits and annuities is currently around 34 million dollars, an amount that disaffiliating churches still have an obligation to support. For more information, the Wespath FAQ can be accessed [here](#).

How is an individual church's pro rata fair share of the pension obligation determined by the Arkansas Conference?

In order to ensure money is available to pay for pastors' pensions, Wespath recommends a target of 110% of the above calculation. This is to help reduce the risk of "catch-up payments" which occur when the plan drops below 100% funding status. Once the Arkansas Conference's share of the current funding level of each of the three parts of the plan is determined, the local church's percentage share is then calculated by using its total annual operating income divided by the total for all churches in the Conference. It is anticipated that the fair share amount determined on July 1, 2020 will remain fixed throughout the disaffiliation period in order to provide an established liability amount for local churches considering disaffiliation. Further questions about the pension obligations of the Arkansas Conference or individual congregations should be sent by the church Trustee Chairperson, Church Council Chairperson or Pastor to their district superintendent.

What will happen to the status of a church's current membership if that church disaffiliates?

Upon disaffiliation, the church laity who agreed with the decision to disaffiliate will no longer be considered members of the United Methodist Church and their future status will be determined by the final destination of that congregation. Members who disagree with a decision of their congregation to disaffiliate and wish to remain United Methodist will be offered an opportunity by their District Superintendent to transfer their membership to another United Methodist congregation. This will all be established as part of the Disaffiliation Agreement.

What happens to any clergy whose church leaves through disaffiliation?

It is important to note that a local church decision whether or not to disaffiliate is separate from the clergy person's decision, and may not be the same. If a church disaffiliates, the pastor who had been appointed or assigned to serve that congregation will remain with the United Methodist Church unless they intentionally decide to leave with the church by surrender of their credentials. If the disaffiliating congregation joins the GMC or another denomination and the pastor seeks to leave with the congregation, their pastor's salary, benefits, appointment and tenure will be determined according to the new denomination's polity. If the disaffiliating congregation becomes independent, their pastor's salary, benefits and tenure will be determined solely by that congregation. If the church's current pastor does not choose to exit the UMC, he or she will remain part of the appointive system of the United Methodist Church. In all cases, congregations thinking of leaving The United Methodist Church should pay careful and compassionate attention to the many impacts their decision will have on their clergy, and clergy should remain in close contact with their district superintendent throughout the process of disaffiliation.

If a local church disaffiliates from the United Methodist Church and their current pastor leaves with them, either as an appointment or direct hire, what will happen to that pastor's pension benefits?

The answer to this question is both technical and complicated, but for the latest and best information on pension benefits Wespath, the UMC's Church Benefits agent, has on their website a comprehensive FAQ dealing with disaffiliation and pension. It may be accessed at <https://www.wespath.org/about-wespath/wayforwardwespathfaq>. Clergy with questions about their own individual benefits should contact Mona Williams, the Arkansas Conference Benefits Officer, at mwilliams@arumc.org or (501) 324-8028.

If churches and clergy have openly declared they are disaffiliating, will they be allowed to vote at Annual Conference?

Congregations remain United Methodist until their disaffiliation is approved by the annual conference, and clergy remain United Methodist until their credentials have been surrendered. Until that time their current rights to vote at annual conference remain unchanged.

Where can we go to find out which churches, if any, in the Arkansas Conference are seeking to disaffiliate?

In order to maintain some level of confidentiality, especially during the discernment phase of the disaffiliation process, and to respect the right of churches to explore their future options without undue pressure from others, we will not be publicly publishing a running list on our website of churches wanting to disaffiliate. For questions you may have about individual churches you should contact your district superintendent.

What happens if the Annual Conference votes "No" on a motion for disaffiliation?

Ultimately, the Annual Conference must approve all disaffiliation requests by a simple majority, and if it does not the disaffiliation is not approved. However, if all the steps have been properly followed, this is not likely.

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

For more general information from the Arkansas Conference about disaffiliation, go to www.arumc.org/current-landscape. For all questions or if your church is ready to enter into the process of disaffiliation, an official representative of the church should contact your district superintendent in writing with a request to begin the process.