
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 congregations and clergy who feel it is or may be time now to depart the UMC in order to explore paths more closely aligned to their current beliefs, disaffiliation, as described in ¶12553 of the *2016 Discipline of the United Methodist Church* is the only path that can be used.

What is Disaffiliation?

Disaffiliation is a process described in ¶12553 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."* With a final Annual Conference Special Session now set for October 15, 2023, churches wanting to enter the discernment process should do so by June 1, 2023 in order to have sufficient time for the process for exiting the denomination to be complete prior to December 31, 2023 when the provisions of ¶12553 are set to expire.

For churches considering the possibility of disaffiliation, what is the process being 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 present at a final listening session must show they are in favor of moving forward in the process. Then, at a duly called church conference (¶1248), 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. Nothing requires 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.

How long will a disaffiliation process take?

The answer will vary depending on the individual congregation's circumstances, but in general the entire process can easily take six months to complete. For planning purposes a number of things must be kept in mind:

- ¶2553.2 clearly states that the provisions of ¶ 2553 expire on December 31, 2023 and cannot be used after that date.
- With a final Annual Conference Special Session now set for October 15, 2023, churches wanting to enter the discernment process should do so by June 1, 2023 in order to have 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.
- The Principles for Disaffiliation used by the Arkansas Conference call for a minimum three-month discernment period before any decision about disaffiliation can be made. If a decision is then made to pursue disaffiliation, there is still a minimum disciplinary ten-day waiting period before a Church Conference can be held to vote on disaffiliation.
- If the church does vote to disaffiliate, all material needed to complete the standard disaffiliation agreement must then be submitted to the Conference Trustees a minimum of three weeks before the Annual Conference session at which the church hopes its agreement will be considered for ratification. Of course, if there are legal questions or concerns, a complex congregational situation or endowments, or missing information, that legal review and the Trustee review process could take considerably longer.
- The disaffiliation agreement must be ratified by a duly called session of Arkansas Annual Conference. Our first special session was held on November 19, 2022. Our second special session will be held on May 13, 2023, and our final special session will be held on October 15, 2023.

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 their District Superintendent.

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

It is important to understand that even if a church votes to disaffiliate and the annual conference ratifies their disaffiliation agreement, all current members of the local United Methodist Church remain United Methodist unless and until they specifically request for their membership to be removed. Again, the default is for United Methodist members to remain United Methodist! Members who disagree with a decision of their congregation to disaffiliate will be offered an opportunity by their District Superintendent to transfer their membership to another United Methodist congregation or to become part of a new United Methodist community in their community.

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 the denomination.

If a local church disaffiliates from the United Methodist Church and their current pastor leaves with them, 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 our congregation is considering disaffiliation, where should we go for more information?

For more general information about disaffiliation, go to www.arumc.org/current-landscape.