

## **Information Regarding the Discernment Process**

When the District Superintendent receives notice from a local church that the appropriate leadership body of the church (e.g. Administrative Board, Church Council, etc.) has voted *“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 the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church related to these issues that follow, we, the \_\_\_\_\_ United Methodist Church, under the authority of ¶2553 of The 2016 Book of Discipline and the "Principles Regarding Local Church Requests for Disaffiliation" ratified by the 2021 Arkansas Annual Conference, request to begin the discernment process that may or may not lead to disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church, the following steps must be followed before the church will be allowed to begin the discernment process:*

1. Along with the letter, official minutes of that action must be submitted to the DS indicating that a majority of the members of that leadership body present and voting voted to pursue the disaffiliation process for the reasons stated in the motion above.
2. The pastor should work closely with the church Leadership Council to design and submit to the DS for approval by the Appointive Cabinet a plan for a minimum three month discernment period. This plan must include at a minimum:
  - a. A statement that the purpose of the three month discernment process is to engage in a time of prayer, study, honest and open conversation among the laity and led by the laity to determine whether God is leading the congregation to remain in the United Methodist Church or to consider disaffiliation from the denomination;
  - b. a clear identification of the leadership body that will be responsible for this discernment process, along with the name and contact information of the lay person or persons who will lead this work. This group must be an official body of the church (ie. Administrative Board, Leadership Council, Trustees, etc), not an ad-hoc committee;
  - c. how the congregation will be informed about the public resources available on the conference website concerning the disaffiliation process adopted by the Arkansas Annual Conference and details concerning every aspect of the discernment process in which the congregation will be engaged;
  - d. a statement that in order to promote a fair, open and balanced discernment process, both those in favor of disaffiliation and those in favor of remaining United Methodist will have equal access to all church facilities and communication platforms in order to share information regarding their positions.
  - e. that every meeting will provide a period of time when those present can verbally ask questions about the process or matters related to staying in the UMC or disaffiliating, and verbally share their opinion about what they feel God is leading them to do;
  - f. that in the interest of fairness and transparency, a speaker will be invited to the second meeting to articulate why he or she believes it is important to remain in the United Methodist Church. While every church is free to invite whoever they wish to speak, a list of clergy who have offered to make themselves available to speak at these congregational members will be provided to the pastor and church leadership team. While not required, if your church chooses to invite a pro-disaffiliation speaker, that person will also be expected to

speaking at the second listening session, leaving the third session for professing members only to speak. In choosing a speaker or speakers, several principles shall be followed:

- i. Speakers may be lay or clergy.
  - ii. No speaker shall be closely connected with the congregation. Former pastors or close relatives of church members and church staff shall be avoided.
  - iii. If inviting two speakers, both shall be well-matched in giftedness, shall have similar ministry/career experiences, and be equally respected in ministry.
  - iv. If two speakers are scheduled, each speaker shall receive the same amount of time to speak, and the pro-disaffiliation speaker shall speak first.
- g. the dates, times, and agendas of listening sessions two and three, along with the issues that will be addressed and how discussion will be facilitated in each meeting, since the district superintendent will only lead the first congregational listening session;
- h. how attendance of professing members will be kept for each session;
- i. a statement outlining how the membership roll of professing members will be made available - without private contact information - early in the process so that individuals may confirm their membership and voting status well before the straw poll and potential church conference.
- j. the fact that a straw poll of professing members, by written ballot using a ballot form provided by the DS, will be taken at the third listening session to determine if the district superintendent will call a church conference to vote on disaffiliation;
- k. how a statement will be developed and shared that summarizes the findings of the three meetings, reports the outcome of the straw poll and, if approved by the straw poll, articulates the congregation's desire to pursue a congregational vote on disaffiliation "*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 the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church related to these issues that follow*" or to remain United Methodist.
- l. a statement acknowledging that in order to move forward in the disaffiliation process, the motion to disaffiliate must be approved by a two-thirds majority of the professing members present and voting at the church conference;
- m. a statement that once approved by the Appointive Cabinet, any changes to the church's discernment plan must be approved by the DS;
- n. a statement acknowledging that the DS will certify completion of the discernment process and authorize a church conference to be held only if satisfied that all aspects of the church's discernment plan have been properly followed and completed.

This required three-month minimum discernment process begins when the DS receives the church's initial communication. However, once the discernment process is approved by the Appointive Cabinet, it is expected that the congregational meetings will be conducted over a full three-month period, since discerning a vision for God's purpose for the church requires both time and prayer. Along with this discernment period and the minimum Disciplinary ten-day waiting period for a Church Conference, be aware that in order to have time to do their work all material needed to complete the standard disaffiliation agreement must be submitted to the Conference Trustees a minimum of three weeks before the Annual Conference session at which you hope your church's agreement will be considered for ratification. More complex congregational situations may require even more time. 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.

It is vital that the pastor and laity alike understand and embrace that this discernment process is intended to be a time for the local congregation to pray, listen to God, engage in deep and honest conversation with all congregational members, and to embrace a 'heart of peace' as the professing members of the church discern God's will about their future. As such this discernment process must be driven by the laity of the church. The pastor will have an important role in facilitating the process, maintaining a "heart of peace" among the congregation as the laity discern, and promoting a fair, open and balanced process for all positions. *It is not the pastor's role to lead the discernment process; that is the work of the professing members of the congregation.* However, the pastor should work closely with the identified leadership body of the church to design and implement the church discernment plan, and the leadership body and the pastor should keep each other informed of every step in the discernment process. When all is said and done, the professing members may decide to depart, may choose to remain in the United Methodist Church or may discern to spend a longer period of time in holy conversation about their future.