

FAQs on Denominational Issues

1. What has changed in our denomination since 2019?

The short answer is nothing.

In the United Methodist Church, changes can only come through the General Conference. The General Conference is a representative body that meets every four years. Out of that comes the *Book of Discipline*, which is what United Methodist Churches around the world use as our common guidance for how to be church and to minister. Much of the *Book of Discipline* is reaffirmed every General Conference. Some changes are made.

Occasionally a special called General Conference happens out of the four-year sequence, such as in 2019 when the focus of that gathering was human sexuality. The prohibition on performing same-sex weddings and ordaining self-avowed homosexuals was upheld, with additional consequences adopted for violations to those prohibitions.

It was anticipated that there would be policy changes adopted at the 2020 General Conference, but the 2020 General Conference was postponed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. There has not been a General Conference since 2019, so no changes since then. The next General Conference is April 23-May 3, 2024 in Charlotte, NC.

Most people expect changes at the 2024 General Conference. A proposal is anticipated that would create more regional flexibility, including in the United States. (Currently churches outside the USA can adapt portions of the *Book of Discipline* to better reflect the particularities of their context, but there is no such provision for the USA churches.) Many people also anticipate the removal of the prohibitions about marrying same-sex couples and ordaining homosexuals. If this change occurs it may well include local autonomy, as it did when the Episcopal, Presbyterian (USA), and Lutheran (ELCA) churches made changes to their policies over the past 15 years. Nothing of this nature can change outside of the General Conference and until the legislation is received, debated, and adopted, nothing can be said about the changes with certainty.

2. Isn't there a deadline for leaving the denomination in 2023?

Not in South Carolina.

Within the General Conference (which has membership from across the world) are Annual Conferences. Our Annual Conference is within the borders of South Carolina. Other states, such as North Carolina, have 2 Annual Conferences. Each Annual Conference is led by a presiding bishop who helps interpret the *Book of Discipline* for the Annual Conference.

A paragraph adopted at the 2019 General Conference (#2553

<https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-discipline-2553-disaffiliation-over-human-sexuali>

ty) was intended to help congregations who could no longer abide by the denomination's stance on human sexuality to exit. Not anticipating a global pandemic that would postpone General Conference 4 years, a "sunset clause" of December 31, 2023 was included in this provision.

The idea was that a one-time, short-term exception would be allowed for congregations to purchase the church property from the denomination so they could exit.

Our bishop and Annual Conference trustees determined that since there has been no known violation of the *Book of Discipline* in South Carolina, as relates to the prohibition against weddings and ordination, the new paragraph would not apply and that churches wishing to exit the denomination would do so by closing. This would mean a different paragraph from the *Book of Discipline* would apply and that there would be no expiration date set to the exiting process. This is paragraph #2549 (<https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-discipline-2549-disposition-of-property-of-a-closed-local-church>) and will remain in place after 2023.

Because the South Carolina Annual Conference is not using the expiring paragraph #2553 for our process, there is no deadline for completing the Discernment Process or entering into disaffiliation.

3. What is South Carolina's Discernment Process?

In December of 2022, the trustees and bishop of South Carolina announced a Discernment Process for churches wanting to explore what it would mean to leave the United Methodist denomination. This process is outlined here: <https://www.umcsc.org/discern/>. As you can read, it is left to the local church's Church Council to determine whether or not to initiate the process. Churches that elect to, must complete the process, including a churchwide vote of members who are present, before March 1st of the year in which they want to disaffiliate. They must have their payment ready by the end of May of that year and a vote would occur at that June's Annual Conference meeting to release them from the denomination.

4. Will a change in bishops change our process?

Possibly, but likely not immediately.

It is possible that our current bishop, Jonathan Holston, will complete his tenure with South Carolina in August of 2024. A new bishop would be appointed and help interpret the *Book of Discipline* for South Carolina at that point. It is possible that the new bishop would interpret matters differently than Bishop Holston. If so, it is much likelier than not that given 1.) this was a process agreed to by Bishop Holston and the trustees of the South Carolina Annual Conference and 2.) this process has been presented as having no sunset, that, at a minimum, a new bishop would give a reasonable amount of time for churches that, in light of any changes made by the 2024 General Conference related to human sexuality, would then desire to disaffiliate. So, yes, it is possible that a change in

bishops would adjust our process, but, should that happen, it is very likely that the change would be after the period of time needed to accomplish the provisions of our current process.

5. Who owns the church property?

The United Methodist Church.

John Wesley, when establishing the Methodist Church in the 1700s, included a provision called, "The Trust Clause." For the entirety of the Methodist movement, church property has been held in trust by the denomination, not by individual churches or their members. This serves as a reminder that it is God's church, not ours, and helps the church maintain focus on what Christ calls the church to collectively, rather than being overly influenced by particular individuals within the congregation.

The 2019 decision to temporarily suspend the Trust Clause allows churches that cannot live with the policies related to human sexuality to depart with their property. It is meant to create as amicable a leavetaking from the UMC as possible in congregations where disaffiliation is determined to be the best of the available options.

6. Why have some South Carolina United Methodist Churches already left?

Faithful discernment among Jesus' followers can lead to different decisions.

During the June, 2023 Annual Conference, 113 United Methodist churches in South Carolina officially closed and left the denomination. 953 congregations in South Carolina remained with the United Methodist Church. Each church would have to answer their specific reasons for leaving or staying. Some of the explanations for leaving include the feeling that a change in prohibitions related to homosexuality is inevitable and that this represents a broader move toward more progressive theology. Some reasons for staying in the UMC include an appreciation for the denomination's history, theology, church governance, and practice of ministry. Other reasons churches stayed this past year include last year's timeline for the Discernment Process. Still others have determined that it is premature to leave before learning what actually happens during the 2024 General Conference.

7. Why has Belin not entered the Discernment Process?

The Church Council reviewed the Discernment Process in January of 2023. It was determined by the Council that the tight timeline to accomplish what was required would require a great deal of time and attention, distracting focus from ongoing and vital ministries. The Council also recognized that there is much more to learn, including what actually comes out of the 2024 General Conference. We do not want to make decisions based on speculation about what might happen.

8. What should we do now?

Pray. Study. Respect. Help.

Please continue to pray. Whatever our individual opinions about the theology of human sexuality or other denominational matters, collectively we want to honor and serve God and grow in our faith and discipleship as Jesus' followers. This is one thing we have in common - we have chosen to follow Jesus. That remains primary and unifying. Pray for the Holy Spirit to continue to lead us toward that, while revealing to us whatever we need to know as a local church.

Study scripture and tradition, while learning from experience and reason. Seek perspectives from faithful Christians with differing perspectives on these issues. Jesus has disciples who see things similarly to the way you do and he has disciples who see things differently than you. Try to learn how they came to those perspectives as fellow followers of Christ.

As you pray and learn, you may discover more questions or you may come to greater insight or, likely, both of those things will happen. Inevitably that will mean some disagreement with others who have prayed and learned and come to different questions and insights than yours. Be respectful and kind in how you treat them, even when disagreeing.

Continue to help Belin Memorial be the kind of church that reaches out and invites in. Don't let these important discussions prevent us from pursuing together the mission that God has before us: to make disciples of Jesus Christ.