



## **What should United Methodist congregations know about disaffiliation? Ask the UMC**

### [Article Link](#)

With the postponement of the 2020 General Conference to 2024 and the announcement by the Wesleyan Covenant Association that it will launch the Global Methodist Church on May 1, 2022, we at Ask The UMC are receiving many more questions about disaffiliation.

These questions have made it clear that there is a lot of confusion and misinformation in the church about this topic.

Our role at Ask The UMC is to provide accurate official information about The United Methodist Church. While we do not wish to see any church disaffiliate, our goal with this FAQ is to provide clarity about the process and dispel confusion.

### **Step 1. Contact your district superintendent (or their designee).**

Whether your congregation is beginning to explore possibilities of disaffiliating or seems ready to take a vote, the first and most important step is for your pastor to contact your district superintendent.

If you are the pastor and you are just beginning to explore these questions, contact your superintendent to ask for guidance about how to explore well and for detailed information about how the process of disaffiliation works in your annual conference. This is important, because exactly how the process will work varies by annual conference. What you may have heard or read about in another conference may not apply in yours. Your district superintendent can give you the most accurate information so your congregation can make its best decisions informed by the facts.

If you are the pastor and your congregation is ready to hold a congregational vote, contact the district superintendent and ask to schedule a special called church conference for this purpose. The district superintendent may have additional questions for you at that time to make sure you are working from accurate information and a clear sense of the congregation's readiness for a vote. These questions are not designed to delay you. They are designed to ensure your congregation's decision process is well-informed, healthy, and in keeping with all of the requirements set forth by the Book of Discipline and your annual conference.

If you are not the pastor, you will want to talk with your pastor about any questions or concerns about the process.

## **Step 2. Understand the terms that apply to your congregation.**

Three paragraphs in the current Book of Discipline may be used to complete a disaffiliation in which the congregation may retain much or all of its property and assets. These are ¶2553, ¶2548.2, and, under some unusual circumstances, ¶2549.3.b.

### Using Paragraph 2553

The Council of Bishops have affirmed that they see ¶2553, added by the 2019 special called General Conference, as “[the primary paragraph](#) used for disaffiliation or separation.” They have also recognized that there may be some instances where ¶2548.2 or ¶2549.3.b may apply, and have indicated “they would employ the values and principles as outlined in paragraph 2553” in such cases as well.

¶2553 outlines the steps the congregation, the district superintendent, and the conference must take to request, meet the criteria for, and complete a disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church.

These provisions require, at a minimum, three things:

- a. a decision to disaffiliate by a two-thirds majority of the professing members present at a church conference (not charge conference);
- b. the payment in full of two years of that congregation’s apportionment commitment as set by the conference;
- c. the payment in full of the congregation’s pro-rata share of the conference’s pension liability, based on a formula approved by the annual conference.

Annual conferences may add to these requirements, and some have done so. Some conferences require a full three years of apportionment payments. Some require repayment in full of grants made to the local church. And most require that the congregation complete a discernment process, guided by the district superintendent, before a church conference may be scheduled to consider disaffiliation.

Disaffiliation is complete only when all payments due are made in full and the annual conference has approved the motion of disaffiliation

### Using Paragraph 2548.2

This paragraph has been part of the Book of Discipline for many years. It permits the annual conference to direct the local church trustees to assign the deeds of church property to the proper legal representatives of a Pan Methodist church or another evangelical denomination. The transfer may happen “under an allocation, exchange of property, or comity agreement, provided

that such agreement shall have been committed to writing and signed and approved by the duly qualified and authorized representatives of both parties concerned.”

The key words in that sentence are “permit” and “annual conference.” This paragraph was created to give permission to annual conferences to order such transfers of deeds at the request of the local church. This paragraph does not create a right or a process for congregations to transfer their property to other denominations. It creates a right for congregations to request such transfer. The annual conference is the body that sets the conditions for transfer and determines whether and when such transfer may take place. And the annual conference may only consider such a request after the presiding bishop and the majority of the district superintendents and the district board of location and building have given their consent.

While the language of ¶2548 permits either a vote of the charge conference or of a church conference to request disaffiliation, the Council of Bishops has noted that [Judicial Council Decision 1379](#) requires that *any* motion to disaffiliate must “to be approved, reach a two thirds majority of the professing members present and voting at the church conference.” This means the lower thresholds named in ¶2548.2 do not apply as a valid vote to request disaffiliation. Requests made under the provisions of this paragraph will also require a 2/3 majority vote of a church conference.

The Council of Bishops has also clarified that bishops would “employ the values and principles of ¶2553” in the limited cases where ¶2548.2 may apply. At a minimum, this would require those seeking to exit using ¶2548.2 to pay in full the congregation’s pro-rata share of pension obligations. Each conference may determine additional payment requirements.

#### Using Paragraph 2549.3.b

This paragraph authorizes the presiding bishop and majorities of the district superintendents and the district board of location and building to declare that “exigent circumstances exist that require immediate protection of the local church’s property.” The effect of that declaration is the immediate transfer of all property and assets of a local church to the control of the conference board of trustees. Exigent circumstances include, but are not limited to, situations where the property will no longer be used for the purposes of The United Methodist Church or the congregation is no longer in a position to maintain it for the denomination.

In this circumstance, the congregation may request that the conference board of trustees establish terms to obtain its former property and some of its assets. There are no guarantees, however, about what terms the trustees may offer, and the trustees are under no obligation to negotiate the terms they offer. So while it may be possible for your congregation to exit under this paragraph

and have some property and assets when you do, the risks of greater costs or the entire loss of property and assets are also real.

### **Step 3. Use a discernment process facilitated by the district superintendent.**

Your district superintendent will help your congregation complete an intentional discernment process before a church conference to vote on disaffiliation is scheduled. Working through this process with the district superintendent is not only required in most conferences, but wise. Using such a process will help your congregation make its decisions with due care for each other and your future together.

A sound discernment process helps members of the congregation listen to and respect each other's views, learn about both the costs and the benefits of either decision, and help reveal whether there is a two-thirds majority of professing members to allow a vote for disaffiliation to prevail. Wise congregational leadership will choose not to schedule a church conference to vote on disaffiliation if there is uncertainty about that majority.

A sound discernment process may also be able to reduce harms that may be unintentionally caused by the results of the vote. Votes about disaffiliation are never simply rational or financial. They are also deeply emotional. A vote to disaffiliate is a vote to leave relationships with other people and institutions that have helped congregation members grow in Christ over the years. In other denominations, such votes have resulted in people leaving the church. The questions become who leaves, how many people leave, and how to address the losses to the remaining congregation when they leave.

Your district superintendent will work with your congregation at each step of the discernment process. Discipleship Ministries and The Council of Bishops are developing resources to assist congregations in their discernment. [You can find the Discipleship Ministries resources here.](#) Wespath has also posted [an informative FAQ](#) about the impact of disaffiliation on continued ability to participate in the UMC's pension programs. We will continue to update this page with additional resources as they are made available.

### **Step 4. Follow the terms of your process carefully.**

The denomination's Trust Clause remains in effect at all times. All congregations and ministries of The United Methodist Church hold their property and assets in trust for the denomination, and specifically for the annual conference.

Under any process of disaffiliation, your congregation will want to avoid any situation in which you do not follow or appear not to follow the requirements as set forth by the Discipline and your conference.

If a congregation takes actions that have the effect of severing it from The United Methodist Church or uniting it with another denomination, apart from the guidance of the district superintendent and the requirements of the Discipline and the conference, the provisions of ¶2549.3.b to transfer all property and assets of the congregation to the conference board of trustees may come into effect. And in a situation where the congregation has acted in ways that are not compliant with the Discipline and the guidance of the district superintendent, the conference board of trustees may not offer the congregation any terms to obtain its former property or assets.

This is not an outcome that bishops or congregations would prefer. The [bishops are prepared to pursue this outcome](#) under the authority of the Trust Clause should it be required.

Still, it is an outcome that can easily be avoided.

Clear lines of communication between the church and the district superintendent that show ongoing progress toward completing the processes set forth by the Discipline and the conference will help ensure as gracious a transition and outcome for all as all would desire.