



BLESSING ONE ANOTHER

NAVIGATING CHANGES IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Frequently Asked Questions

INTRODUCTION

In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church came together to form The United Methodist Church (UMC). In the 50 years since its founding, the members of our “Big Tent” denomination have engaged in a passionate debate to define church beliefs. Matters relating to human sexuality have been debated within the UMC since 1972. In January 2020, the “Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation” was presented as a way to divide the Church over differences in ministry with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) community. The worldwide members must approve the proposal at General Conference for it to take effect. With the postponement of General Conference until 2024 and the launch of the Global Methodist Church (GMC) in May 2022, some churches are discerning if they should disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church.

What are the likely emphases of The UMC going forward?

As explained in a statement by The United Methodist Church Council of Bishops, The UMC will seek to be a broadly inclusive church. Therefore, it will be much more open to ministry with and to LGBTQ+ persons. There will be space for diverse, and perhaps even contradictory, convictions as the church seeks to understand and live out Christ's call more fully. The UMC will need to streamline and prioritize its General Church structure and missional programs. For key themes in the continuing United Methodist Church see <https://www.umc.org/en/what-we-believe/umc-topics/our-people/beumc>

What are the significant differences between the GMC and The UMC?

The GMC is a more traditionalist expression of Methodism, emerging from the Wesleyan Covenant Association. Not all congregations that choose to disaffiliate will join the GMC.

According to materials published by the GMC, it will be characterized by:

- A stricter acceptance of doctrine and traditionalist positions on sexuality and more assertive ways of enforcing this doctrine.
- A reduction of the connectional structures of the general conference, annual conference, and local church.
- Changes to the office of bishop – elimination of lifetime appointments; accountability to the GMC's general conference.
- Elimination of the category of Licensed Local Pastor (LLP) - LLPs will be ordained Deacons, a category that will include permanent Deacons and those seeking Elder status.
- Elimination of guaranteed appointments for clergy and permission for local church councils to decide how to search for their pastors.



How will the Michigan Conference of The UMC operate?

Bishop David Bard has consistently said that he desires The UMC and the Michigan Conference to be committed to “spaciousness.” The expectation is for freedom of thought and conscience. This freedom will exist for those who consider themselves “liberal” and those who consider themselves “conservative.”

Bishop Bard and the Appointive Cabinet will continue to facilitate appointment-making in a manner that minimizes disruption for congregations and clergy. This includes the possibility of appointing non-UMC clergy to UM congregations and UM clergy to non-UMC congregations contingent upon the approval of the Board of Ordained Ministry. Both arrangements are allowed by The Book of Discipline.

Our congregation wants to stay with the United Methodist Church. Does this mean we must agree to receive an LGBTQ+ clergy and allow same-gender weddings?

Under the vision cast by Bishop Bard and the current Council of Bishops, no congregation will be required to receive an appointment in which the clergyperson will not be accepted well by the congregation; this may include the acceptance of an LGBTQ+ clergyperson.

Just as they do now, the Bishop and Appointive Cabinet will consult with churches and do their best to match the gifts of clergy with the leadership needs of the congregation in ways that are likely to enhance the ministry of the congregation and allow the gifts of the clergyperson to flourish.

No clergy or congregation will be required to perform same-gender wedding services. Whether to perform weddings will remain a matter of clergy discretion. Building policies related to weddings will remain a matter for local church leadership.

What happens if our congregation decides it should disaffiliate from The UMC before General Conference 2024?

In accordance with [Judicial Council Decision 1422](#), the Michigan Conference lay and clergy leadership believes that the decision to stay or leave the denomination should be one of conscience. There is a fair, simple, and consistently applied process for those congregations that have prayerfully discerned disaffiliation as their best course.

The process of disaffiliating from The UMC for reasons of conscience relating to matters of human sexuality is governed through December 31, 2023, by paragraph (¶) 2553, which was added to The Book of Discipline by the General Conference in February of 2019. General Conference is the only body that can amend The Book of Discipline, including ¶2553.

Any church that wishes to explore disaffiliation should begin by contacting its District Superintendent. The process for Michigan local churches is detailed further in this document.

Are there advantages to waiting for the next General Conference before disaffiliating?

Perhaps. A separation plan voted on at General Conference 2024 will likely present more favorable financial terms for a congregation wanting to join another Methodist expression. This is especially true as it relates to unfunded pension liabilities. It is possible that the unfunded pension liability of a disaffiliating congregation may be assumed by the GMC, for example, rather than distributed among its local churches. Only a General Conference can authorize this.

It is in a congregation's best interest to explore its options carefully and not rush toward disaffiliation.

What are the steps to disaffiliation before General Conference 2024?

Be certain you and your congregation fully understand the long-term legal and financial consequences of disaffiliating.

The current disaffiliation process in Michigan follows the directions passed at the 2019 General Conference as implemented by the Michigan Conference Board of Trustees. Materials for this disaffiliation process are on the [Conference Website](#).

- The congregation must vote on the proposal to disaffiliate at a duly called Church Conference. A two-thirds vote of the congregation will be required for the proposal to pass. This vote will need to have a moral grounding based on an objection to The UMC's current or future stance toward LGBTQ+ persons..
- The District Superintendent will be the point person for starting and guiding the disaffiliation process to the point of the Church Conference vote. The Special Assistant to the Bishop for Disaffiliation will work with the congregation after the vote and up to the point of the Annual Conference vote. The Conference Board of Trustees will complete the process and prepare all formal documents.
- The congregation will have financial obligations. Specific amounts will be provided by the District Superintendent and Conference Chief Financial Officer. These include:
 - Unpaid ministry shares for the twelve months immediately before the disaffiliation date, and twelve month's ministry shares after it;
 - Two times the current annual ministry shares allocation representing the congregation's property values. Congregations can request a waiver of this required payment if they are current in their payment of ministry shares, have paid their ministry shares in full for the past three years, and will be joining another Methodist denomination, and the Michigan Conference receives confirmation of such from that denomination;
 - The pro-rata share of the annual conference's aggregate unfunded pension obligation as established by Wespeth and annually specified by the Michigan Conference Chief Financial Officer;
 - All unpaid pension, and health insurance balances from prior years, and any outstanding loans.

Disaffiliation will need to be approved by a vote of the Annual Conference session.

In return for payment of all funds due and the formal Annual Conference vote, the United Methodist Trust Clause will be released with a quitclaim deed releasing any and all restrictions imposed by the United Methodist Book of Discipline (i.e. the Trust Clause).

The congregation will retain all its personal property, including fund balances.

What is the aggregate unfunded pension obligation and how is it calculated?

The United Methodist Church is a connectional church. We make promises together; for mutual support, for shared ministry, for helping each other, and for reaching out to the world together in mission. As United Methodists, we have made promises to those who have agreed to serve our conference in ordained and licensed ministry for Jesus Christ, including the pastors who have been appointed to your congregation. As a connectional church, this is a shared promise made by all our churches to all our pastors. Included in the promises made to our clergy is our denomination pension plan.

Our pension plans have changed through the years, but they all have combined *defined benefit* and *defined contribution* elements. The defined benefit component is a promise we make to our clergy that they will receive a certain lifetime monthly benefit for the clergy and spouse in retirement based on their years of service in ministry to the church. Fulfilling these promises creates a liability for each annual conference based on the number of clergy and years of service. The liability fluctuates based on the stock and bond markets *in which these funds are invested*.

Every year, the Michigan Annual Conference receives from Wespath (our denominational pension plan administrator) an estimate of what would need to be paid in order to meet all our obligations to those who are currently vested in our pension plan until the last clergy and spouse so vested died which could last through 2090 or beyond. It is the cost of keeping our covenantal promises. The amount for all annual conferences is based on the market valuation.

At General Conference 2019, legislation was passed to revise The Book of Discipline regarding disaffiliation and the unfunded pension liability. New paragraph 2553 requires disaffiliating churches to pay their pro rata share of unfunded pension liability for their conference, among other amounts. An unfunded pension liability exists when the promised future pension payments exceed the current assets in the pension fund. Pension payments for current active clergy are expected to be paid through about the year 2090. Utilizing market factors, Wespath Benefits & Investments originally (after the 2019 General Conference) estimated The Michigan Conference total unfunded liability for accrued pension benefits and annuities at \$105,212,662.



Over the last several years market values, have fluctuated greatly. For example, the Michigan Conference's liability exposure as of August 1, 2020, was \$196 million; as of October 1, 2022, it was \$40 million. The Board of Trustees has examined all the relevant figures to determine a reasonable amount for the aggregate unfunded pension obligation. To change the unfunded pension obligation on a monthly basis is not practical. The Conference Board of Trustees has determined that it will engage in recalculation on October 1, 2022 and October 1, 2023.

Based on this recalculation and some other factors, the Michigan Conference's total unfunded liability for accrued benefits and annuities was re-calculated as of October 1, 2022, at \$97,227,568, down from the previous calculation of \$105,212,662.

The Benefits office has used this new number to recalculate all of the individual church obligations, reducing these disaffiliation costs, and has distributed these new figures as requested by the district offices.

Our Annual Conference pension obligations have historically and are currently determined exclusively on compensation. A Pension Grade Figure was calculated by dividing each local church's clergy compensation effective July 1, 2019, by the total Michigan Conference clergy compensation. This grade figure was then multiplied by the total unfunded liability to determine each church's fair share.

Wespath provides a comprehensive FAQ on their website related to both active and retired clergy, local churches, lay employees, institutional investors, and other general information which may be found using the following link:

<https://www.wespath.org/wayforwardwespathfaq/>

Paragraph 2553 can be reviewed in its entirety at:

<https://cdn.cokesbury.com/images/community/cokesburyportals/2016boderrata.pdf>

Can a congregation execute a promissory note to the conference to cover these disaffiliation costs?

No. Execution of a promissory note to cover disaffiliation costs would place the Michigan Conference and the disaffiliating congregation in a potentially unhealthy debtor-creditor relationship, especially with the mortgage on the congregation's property that would need to be taken as security. If a congregation is willing to grant a mortgage on its property, then it is recommended that the congregation go to a bank or other lender and set up a more traditional lending arrangement to fund the disaffiliation costs.

Can a congregation sell its parsonage or other assets to fund the disaffiliation?

Yes. The congregation can sell its parsonage to fund the disaffiliation. However, The Book of Discipline requires that proceeds from the sale of a parsonage must be retained for capital improvements only (paragraph 2543). As such, sale proceeds must be placed in a separate segregated account still subject to this restriction. At the time of completion of the disaffiliation, the congregation can borrow from this fund to cover costs. Other real property assets not related to the parsonage or church building may be sold and used to fund the costs. The Conference will release the Trust Clause on the assets to fund the disaffiliation at closing.

What if a congregation desires to leave the denomination but does not have a moral objection to the LGBTQ+ stance of The United Methodist Church or the Michigan Conference?

The congregation will need to close using the process provided in The Book of Discipline. Financial terms are negotiable in return for the release of the Trust Clause. However, all aggregate unfunded pension obligations are required to be paid as part of the settlement.

The Michigan Conference will presume that if a congregation desires to leave the denomination and close as a United Methodist church, but still remain an active worshipping congregation, the Michigan Conference will require the payments normally attributed to the disaffiliation process under paragraph 2553. Exceptions to the costs associated with this, except for the aggregate unfunded pension obligation, can be made by the Conference Board of Trustees, with the recommendation of the Bishop.

If the congregation desires to close and purchase the property and building for the purpose of re-selling it or re-purposing it for non-church purposes, then the Michigan Conference can negotiate a settlement based on factors such as the fair market value of the property and the intended purpose of the property.

What will happen when paragraph 2553 expires on December 31, 2023? Will congregations still be allowed to disaffiliate?

Yes, though we will not use the term “disaffiliation.” The congregation will need to close under the procedures of The Book of Discipline, but the Michigan Conference intends to still follow the criteria for disaffiliation under paragraph 2553. Read the PDF version of the Blessing One Another FAQ on the website to learn more if you are a church that may not intend to continue as a worshipping congregation.

Will all congregations be required to vote on whether to stay or disaffiliate?

- No current plan requires every congregation to take a vote.
- Any separation agreement approved by General Conference is unlikely to require every congregation to vote.
- By default, congregations not voting will remain in the Michigan Conference of The UMC.
- Those desiring to leave through a plan of separation will vote according to the terms of that plan as determined by General Conference, but not before.
- Those desiring to leave before General Conference through Disaffiliation will vote in a duly-called church conference as determined with the District Superintendent.
- Those desiring to leave through Closure will vote in a duly-called church conference as determined with the District Superintendent.

What happens to me if my church votes to leave or stay, and I disagree with that decision?

You have a number of options to remain with The United Methodist Church. Please contact your District Superintendent by calling the main Conference phone number, 517-347-4030. You can also submit contact information on the StayUMC page <https://michiganumc.org/stayumc/> on our website and a member of the conference team will reach out to discuss your options.

Members who disagree with a decision of their congregation may decide to stay or to transfer their membership to another congregation. District offices may help facilitate such transfers of membership.

Conference leadership will assist individuals and groups from disaffiliating congregation(s) to pursue the possibility of a new church start in their community.

How will our Ministry Shares be affected if we remain in The United Methodist Church?

Congregations that leave The UMC will no longer pay Ministry Shares to the Michigan Conference. The result will be less revenue for the General Church and the annual conference. In theory, the percentage share assessed to each remaining congregation may change. However, the Conference Council on Finance and Administration and Michigan Conference staff are making great efforts now to reduce the conference budget in anticipation of a decline in revenue.



What happens to our clergy if we leave through disaffiliation?

Clergy may choose to remain in The UMC or withdraw their membership and surrender their credentials in order to join another denomination. For the latter, all appointments and benefits will be determined by the new denomination.

Elders who choose to remain in The UMC will be reappointed to a United Methodist congregation by the Bishop. The Bishop and Cabinet have pledged to reappoint all Licensed Local Pastors.

Bishop Bard has stated his willingness to appoint UM clergy to non-United Methodist congregations for limited periods of time. This may be an option for some disaffiliating congregations whose pastors do not wish to leave The UMC.

Candidates for ministry and Certified Lay Ministers (CLM) who wish to remain United Methodist after their congregations disaffiliate must transfer their membership to another United Methodist congregation in Michigan. The candidacy of candidates who remain members of disaffiliated congregations will be discontinued. The certificates of CLMs who remain members of disaffiliated congregations must be surrendered to the District Superintendent.

What is the process for United Methodist clergy to separate from The UMC?

The process differs according to clergy status. In all cases, no United Methodist clergy person may also hold membership in another denomination. Upon joining another denomination, credentials are surrendered and membership in The UMC is terminated, as are appointments and licenses. Serving under appointment by the bishop or relevant judicatory official of another denomination is considered the equivalent of joining that denomination.

- The status of retired United Methodist clergy who serve a church of another denomination or no denomination as a direct hire (not under appointment) will be considered on a case-by-case basis. *All* retired United Methodist clergy must maintain a charge conference relationship with a United Methodist church.
- Ordained Clergy and Associate Members withdrawing to join another denomination submit a written request to Bishop Bard, their District Superintendent, and the Conference Secretary; certificates of membership are surrendered to the Conference Secretary (Book of Discipline ¶360.1).
- Ordained Clergy and Associate Members withdrawing from the Ministerial Office notify Bishop Bard, their District Superintendent, and the Conference Secretary. Their certificates of ordination and membership are surrendered to the Conference Secretary (Book of Discipline ¶360.2).
- Withdrawal by Provisional Members is considered a request for discontinuance. Notification should be sent to the Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, their District Superintendent, and Bishop Bard. Credentials are to be surrendered to the District Superintendent for deposit with the Conference Secretary (Book of Discipline ¶327.6).
- The licenses of Licensed Local Pastors (LLP) are directly tied to their appointment by a United Methodist bishop. LLPs and Retired LLPs withdrawing to unite with another denomination are to notify their District Superintendent, the Chair of their District Committee on Ministry, and Bishop Bard. Licenses are surrendered to their District Superintendent for deposit with the Conference Secretary (Book of Discipline ¶320).

What will happen to the Wespath retirement benefits of clergy who leave The UMC?

In all cases of clergy leaving the denomination, their Wespath accrued retirement benefits will be fully vested. However, the clergy cannot be a participant in the Comprehensive Protection Plan.

If a congregation leaves through a General Conference-approved protocol or plan of separation and unites with the GMC, the new denomination will likely participate in Wespath. The clergy will continue to receive contributions to their retirement plans according to the new plan adopted by the new denomination and Wespath.

If a congregation leaves through Disaffiliation to become independent or closure, the new congregation will not participate in Wespath.

What will happen to the conference health care benefits of the clergy who leave The UMC?

Once clergy leaves membership in The United Methodist Church and the Michigan Conference for any reason, their conference health care plan ends. They cannot participate as active clergy or in retirement, nor will they receive supplemental health care coverage in retirement.

Can a clergy person decide to leave the denomination and join another even if their congregation does not?

Yes. Clergy can choose to join a different denomination even if the congregation they serve remains in The UMC. Joining another denomination requires the approval of that denomination.

In The UMC, clergy do not “transfer”; they withdraw their membership and then receive approval from their new denomination.

While their retirement benefits may be vested, their Michigan Conference health care plan will end as soon as they withdraw.

Can retired clergy join another denomination?

Clergy who are already retired in The UMC can become retired clergy in another denomination if they are acceptable to the new denomination. In such a case, they will retain all retirement benefits through Wespath but they will not be able to participate in the Michigan Conference health care plan or receive supplemental coverage. Retired United Methodist clergy cannot retain membership in The UMC and also in a second denomination.

What questions should we be asking as a congregation before we vote?

Disaffiliation is an emotionally charged conversation, and there is a lot of speculation and inaccurate information including mischaracterization of the direction and theology of the future United Methodist Church. Make sure you have all the best information. After you have the facts, discern why you might consider leaving the denomination.

These are helpful spiritual questions:

- What is the primary focus of your life as a Christian?
- How do you define a Disciple of Jesus Christ?
- What are your primary values as a congregation?
- How open are you to being a part of a denomination that is spacious and open to many ideas?
- Can you participate in a congregation with whom you disagree?
- Do you fully understand the impact on property ownership, clergy pensions, and health care if your church leaves?
- What is the source of your information? Does it offer different perspectives so you can make a fully informed decision?
- How can we continue to bless one another, even in disagreement?

Where can I learn more and stay up to date?

If you have specific questions regarding the future of the church, please reach out to the Michigan Conference staff at contact@michiganumc.org or your local district office.

[The United Methodist Church](#)

[The United Methodist News](#)

[The United Methodist Connectional Table](#)

[The United Methodist Council of Bishops](#)

[Wespath](#)

[The Michigan Conference](#)

- [News](#)
- [General Conference](#)
- [Disaffiliation - Future of the UMC](#)
- [Stay UMC](#)

[Liberation Methodist Connexion](#)

[Wesleyan Covenant Association](#)

[Global Methodist Church](#)

This FAQ was created from the commonly asked questions received by Michigan Conference staff, Bishop David Bard, and conference leadership. It was created and vetted by more than 100 individuals. Information about emerging ministries were gathered from websites of origin and other materials publicly produced and distributed. You are encouraged to seek out other trusted resources about this difficult and complex topic.

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