

FAQ – St. Mark

November 2022

1. Will a copy of St. Mark’s informational presentation be distributed?

A video of the information session, which includes the presentation slides, is posted to the website at <https://www.stmarkcolumbus.com/informational-meeting-video>. While this FAQ document responds to many inquiries, there is more background information provided in the video presentation.

2. How are the policies determined for the United Methodist Church (UMC)?

The United Methodist Church is organized in a similar fashion to the US Government, with legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and an overarching document, the *Book of Discipline*, serving as a constitution. General Conference is the legislative body made up of delegates from the various churches in the denomination. Every four years, United Methodists from around the world assemble to do the legislative work that shapes our shared life.

3. Why is there conflict in the UMC and at General Conference around human sexuality?

The issue of human sexuality has been debated by the UMC since 1972. At the 2016 General Conference, a team was established to study “A Way Forward” for the denomination, and a special session was called. Even after the 2019 special session where a “traditional plan” was approved, there continues to be conflict as the church struggles to achieve consensus and compliance around matters related to human sexuality. The conflict is due to a difference in how those well-known scriptures related to sexuality, gender, and marriage are interpreted. While the Book of Discipline has not been amended, some churches are performing same-sex marriage and are being led by practicing self-avowed homosexual clergy, and in one case, a bishop. Accountability has been difficult to enforce due in large part to jurisdictional autonomy.

4. In conversations around General Conference, three terms are often used: traditionalist, progressive, and centrist. What do these terms mean?

Traditionalists - those who embrace the traditional Christian teaching that biblical marriage is between one man and one woman. Traditionalists support the current stance in the Book of Discipline, which states “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” prohibits the ordination or appointment of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals as clergy, and bans performing same-sex marriages.

Progressives - those who reject the traditional teaching that marriage is between one man and one woman and support marriage of committed same-sex couples. They want to see the Book of Discipline amended to permit performing same-sex marriage in the church, and ordination and appointment of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals as clergy.

Centrists - those who may lean toward either traditionalist or progressive positions on the topic of homosexuality, but are comfortable living between the two different views.

5. What is disaffiliation and what is the process?

A “disaffiliation” process was adopted by the 2019 special session of the General Conference. Under Paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline, a church has “a limited right,” to disaffiliate for “reasons of conscience” regarding issues of human sexuality. This “graceful exit” gives a local church the right to leave, releasing the Trust Clause, which allows the congregation to take their property with them. Paragraph 2553 expires December 31, 2023. The South Georgia Conference has extended the departure deadline until December 31, 2024 under the same terms, using Paragraph 2549 of the Book of Discipline.

6. What are the requirements to exit the United Methodist Church?

- a. Paragraph 2553 outlines the steps the congregation, the district superintendent, and the conference must take to request, meet the criteria for, and complete a disaffiliation.
- b. The decision to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference.
- c. The local church must pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of apportionments.
- d. The local church must contribute its pro rata share of unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference.
- e. These same terms will be used for the South Georgia Conference extension using Paragraph 2549.

7. How much would disaffiliation cost St. Mark?

The current estimated cost for St. Mark is \$350,000, made up of \$165,000 for two years of apportionment and \$185,000 for the pro rata share of pension liability. While the apportionment has been set for 2023, pension liability is subject to change based on market conditions. St. Mark currently has sufficient operating funds to cover the 2023 cost of disaffiliation without drawing emergency reserves. We had a recent windfall with the forgiveness of the government PPP loan, which was in the amount of \$141,467. Like most churches, giving has continued to decline over the past several years. We have cut expenses and been diligent about first using designated funds rather than budgeted funds, when available.

8. What is the Trust Clause?

All property held by a United Methodist Church is held in trust for the benefit of the entire denomination. The property must be used exclusively for the purposes of and to benefit the UMC. If a church chooses to no longer function as part of the UMC, it forfeits all rights to continue to hold the property, and the property itself transfers to the denomination. St. Mark's property is subject to the Trust Clause.

9. What are the options for St. Mark?

- We don't have to do anything, but taking no action is an action, or
- we can wait and see what happens at the next General Conference in 2024, or
- we can disaffiliate from the UMC, or
- we could walk away and start a new church (although that may not be fiscally responsible with the value of our property.)

10. Where is the church leaning?

We do not know. An informal survey of the membership will be conducted during November to help determine which of the options to pursue. It will likely be an electronic survey, although anyone without computer or email access will be given an opportunity to participate.

11. If the church voted to disaffiliate, where we would go?

It is too early to discuss that. That would be a separate discernment process and would include a membership vote.

12. If we disaffiliate, will the membership transfer over with the new organization?

Yes, the membership will go with the church.

13. Can we make sure our pastors are taken care of or can we keep our pastors?

The Annual Conference holds the membership of all its pastors. They are not members of the local church, but are appointed to serve us for one year at a time. Each pastor will make their own personal decision whether to remain with the UMC or transfer their clergy credentials to another denomination. This decision can be the same as our church or it could possibly differ. Wespath, the entity that holds pension funds for pastors, broke away from the UMC to ensure a seamless process to maintain pensions whichever direction a pastor and/or a church takes.

14. At one point, wasn't there a way for the entire South Georgia Conference to leave?

South Georgia Annual Conference had prepared legislation to leave as a whole, but the UMC Judicial Council ruled an entire conference move is unconstitutional. That option was removed.

15. Why is sexuality the only thing we are talking about when the lack of accountability seems to be the root issue?

Pastor Jeremy Alexander answered: Jurisdictions can hold their own people accountable, but they cannot hold people in other jurisdictions accountable. The Book of Discipline says that marriage is between one man and one woman, that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian teaching and that practicing homosexuals can't be ordained.

16. What is the accountability method of the Global Methodist Church and other Methodist denominations? Do we know where the Global Methodist Church stands on issues and their beliefs?

Please refer to their website for details and answers to these and many other questions surrounding the Global Methodist Church. <https://globalmethodist.org/what-we-believe/>

17. Are we jumping the gun when these rules in the Book of Discipline have been in place for a long time?

It may seem that way if you are just becoming aware of this issue with increasing non-compliance to the Book of Discipline. Beginning with the 2016 General Conference, delegates began serious work to resolve the ongoing issues. There is a 2023 deadline to the exit plan offered in Paragraph 2553, which accelerated the need for local churches to make individual decisions.

18. Have we looked at other aspects or benefits, besides the LGBTQ+ debate, to disaffiliation?

There are other differing theological views between Progressive and Traditional Methodists that can be discussed further if our church decides to move forward with the discernment process for disaffiliation. At this point, it is important to focus on the presenting issue, which is human sexuality. At the informational meetings, it was pointed out that we have to respect the Word of God. Our congregation will be providing their thoughts on the presenting issue in the upcoming survey. Other aspects/benefits of disaffiliation would be considered in a separate discernment process if the church decided to move in that direction.

19. Why are traditional churches having to leave the denomination when the General Conference voted to retain the Traditional Plan?

No one is requiring any churches to leave the denomination. While the vote was to retain the Traditional Plan, some annual conferences and Bishops are disregarding the Book of Discipline and continue to ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexual clergy and to perform same-sex marriages. Each congregation has to make its own decision whether to leave.

20. If St. Mark decides to disaffiliate, will there still be space at St. Mark for LGBTQ+ people who want to worship with us?

Yes. St. Mark welcomes all who come to worship with us.