



# **BLESSING ONE ANOTHER**

## **NAVIGATING CHANGES IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

*Frequently Asked Questions*

### **INTRODUCTION**

On April 23, 1968, The United Methodist Church was created when the Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church came together to form The United Methodist Church. In the 50 years since founding the “Big Tent” denomination, members have engaged in a passionate debate to define church beliefs. In January 2020, the [“Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation,”](#) was presented to divide the Church over what church leaders describe as differences in ministry with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) community. The worldwide members must approve the proposal at General Conference to take effect. The 2020 General Conference was postponed until 2024 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel complications.

## **Will there be a General Conference in 2022?**

The [General Conference](#) was scheduled for August 29 – September 6, 2022, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. On March 3, 2022, The Commission on General Conference announced that General Conference will be postponed to 2024.

## **When General Conference meets, is a vote on a separation plan likely?**

Yes. General Conference will likely vote on some form of separation plan. It may include the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation, proposed for General Conference 2020, or similar legislation. A separation plan which emerges from General Conference will hopefully present a process for an acceptable separation into two or more Methodist denominations. A plan will offer guidance for annual conferences, congregations, and clergy to go forward into these new Methodist expressions.

## **Is there work on a separation plan regardless of whether there is a General Conference?**

Yes. There are several efforts to reach an acceptable way forward, forming new denominations even though General Conference will not meet in 2022. To date, no formal proposals or timelines have been established.

## **What expressions of the Methodist movement are coming into focus?**

Currently, there are three expressions of Methodism that are taking shape:

- The United Methodist Church will continue with likely changes, including regional decision-making.
- The Global Methodist Church (GMC) is a more traditionalist expression emerging from the Wesleyan Covenant Association.
- The Liberation Methodist Connexion (LMX) would incorporate congregations seeking a liberation theology and broadly inclusive practice. This expression is not currently planning to form another denomination.



## **What are the significant differences between the GMC and The United Methodist Church?**

The GMC has produced materials that indicate the following:

- The GMC plans to focus on a stricter acceptance of doctrine and traditionalist positions on sexuality.
- The GMC plans to incorporate more assertive ways of enforcing this doctrine.
- The GMC plans to reduce the connectional structure of the general conference, the annual conference, and the local church.
- The GMC plans to eliminate the lifetime appointment of bishops.
- The GMC plans to hold bishops accountable to its larger global general conference rather than jurisdictional conferences.
- The GMC plans to eliminate the category of Licensed Local Pastors and transition Local Pastors to the category of ordained Deacons. The GMC will redefine the category of ordained Deacons to include permanent Deacons and those seeking ordination as Elders.

## **What will be the difference between how The United Methodist Church and the GMC hire clergy?**

Ordained Elders in The United Methodist Church are guaranteed an appointment through the appointment system and itineracy. This means the bishop and a team of experienced clergy, serving as District Superintendents, do their best to match clergy with congregations. By consulting with clergy and congregations and through prayer and conferencing, the appointive cabinet members determine where to deploy clergy. The bishop ultimately affirms those appointments considering several factors such as the gifts and personal life situation of the clergyperson, the needs of the local church, and the needs of the denomination and community.

The GMC is not expected to offer a guaranteed appointment. The GMC, as proposed by the Wesleyan Covenant Association, will allow a church council to decide whether to conduct its own search or request candidates from the bishop. The church council will manage the selection process and seek the approval of the bishop, the presiding elder, the congregation's transition team, and the clergyperson. It is hard to know exactly how this will work, but it appears to be an attempt to provide further control to the local church without moving to an entire call system.

## **What are the significant differences between The United Methodist Church and LMX?**

The LMX is still evolving as a movement, and it is too early to speculate about its structure and polity. As of December 18, 2021, the leaders of the LMX cast doubt on whether they desired to become a separate denomination. Instead, they desire to influence the continuing UMC, keeping before it the inclusion of historically marginalized persons..

## **What are likely emphases of The United Methodist Church going forward after a separation?**

As explained in a [recent statement](#) by The United Methodist Church Council of Bishops, The United Methodist Church will likely 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 United Methodist Church will need to streamline and prioritize its General Church structure and missional programs. The key themes are available on [umc.org](http://umc.org).

## **Will the GMC come into existence before a General Conference?**

The Global Methodist Church has announced it will launch on May 1, 2022.

## **If our congregation wants to leave the denomination, are there advantages to waiting for the next General Conference?**

Yes. Congregations are discouraged from taking votes on what are now only speculative possibilities. A separation plan voted on at General Conference will likely present more favorable financial terms for a congregation wanting to join another Methodist expression. It is in the congregation's best interest to wait to see what is decided. This is especially true as it relates to unfunded pension liabilities. That said, there may be new pathways for separation identified in the coming months. It is in a congregation's best interest to see what may develop and not rush toward separation.

## **Has Bishop Bard offered any of his thoughts on how the Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church will operate post-separation?**

Yes. Bishop Bard has consistently said that he desires The United Methodist Church and the Michigan Conference to be committed to "spaciousness." The desire is for considerably more freedom of thought and conscience than in the departing expressions of Methodism. This freedom will exist for those who consider themselves "liberal" and those who consider themselves "conservative."

The Bishop has consistently said that he desires a grace-filled separation, giving congregations and clergy ample time to decide. In the meantime, he will do his best to facilitate appointment-making to minimize disruption for congregations and clergy. He has noted provisions in the Book of Discipline that allow clergy of other denominations to serve United Methodist congregations. Other Disciplinary provisions allow for United Methodist clergy to serve non-United Methodist churches.



## **Our congregation wants to stay with The United Methodist Church. Does this mean we agree to have an LGBTQ+ clergy and perform 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 where the clergy person will not be accepted well by the congregation, and this may include the acceptance of an LGBTQ+ clergy person. 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 clergy person 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.

## **Now that General Conference will not meet in 2022, what should a congregation do if they desire to leave The United Methodist Church over the LGBTQ+ stance?**

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

Bishop Bard has followed the “Disaffiliation” process passed at the 2019 General Conference and implemented by the Michigan Conference Board of Trustees. Materials for this disaffiliation process are on the [Conference Website](#).

- According to the Discipline, a congregation will need to have a vote at a Church Conference duly called. A two-thirds vote of the congregation will be required. This vote will need to have a moral grounding based on an objection to the current or future stance of The United Methodist Church toward LGBTQ+ persons.
- The District Superintendent will be the point person for starting and achieving this disaffiliation process. The Conference Board of Trustees will complete the process and prepare all formal documents.
- The congregation will have financial obligations, including unpaid ministry shares for the twelve months immediately before the withdrawal date, one year’s ministry shares, plus two times the current annual ministry shares allocation representing the congregation’s property values, pro-rata share of the annual conference’s unfunded pension liability, all unpaid pension, and health insurance balances from prior years, any outstanding loans. The Conference Treasurer and District Superintendent can provide this information.
- 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.
- In the coming months, new pathways may develop. It is prudent to see what these may be.

## **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 and go through the process for Closure for congregations provided in The United Methodist Church Book of Discipline. Financial terms are negotiable in return for the release of the Trust Clause. However, all unfunded pension liabilities are required to be paid as part of the settlement.

Suppose the congregation desires to purchase its property? In that case, the congregation may do so after negotiation of all terms with the Michigan Conference Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees will deed the property to the purchasing congregation for the negotiated purchase price.

## **When do we have to vote?**

- No vote is required or planned at this time.
- Any separation agreement is unlikely to require every congregation to vote.
- By default, congregations not voting will remain in the Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church.
- 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?**

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.

It is also conceivable that if a significant number of individuals of a departing congregation(s) desire to stay with The United Methodist Church, they could pursue a new church start.

## **How will our Ministry Shares be affected if we remain in The United Methodist Church? With churches leaving, will our Ministry Shares increase?**

Congregations that leave The United Methodist Church 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?**

- The clergy will choose to go with the departing congregation or stay with The United Methodist Church.
- If the disaffiliating congregation joins the GMC or the LMX, then the clergy's salary and benefits, appointment, and tenure, will be determined by those new denominations.
- If the disaffiliating congregation becomes independent, then the clergy's salary and benefits, and tenure, will be determined by that congregation.
- If the clergy chooses not to go with a new denomination, they will continue to be reappointed to a United Methodist Church by the bishop.
- In all cases, congregations thinking of leaving The United Methodist Church should research the many impacts on their clergy.

## **If a clergy chooses to leave The United Methodist Church, what will happen to their Wespeth retirement benefits?**

In all cases of clergy leaving the denomination, their Wespeth 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, the new denomination will likely participate in Wespeth. The clergy will continue to receive contributions to their retirement plans according to the new plan adopted by the new denomination and Wespeth.

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

## **If our clergy decides to leave The United Methodist Church, will they remain in the Michigan Conference health care plan and eventually receive supplemental health care coverage in retirement?**

No. Once clergy leave 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.

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

Yes. Even if a congregation does not desire to leave The United Methodist Church, clergy can choose to join, assuming that the clergy is acceptable by the GMC or LMX. The clergy's Wespeth retirement benefits will be vested; however, their Michigan Conference health care plan will end as soon as they leave.

## **Can retired clergy join the GMC and/or LMX?**

Clergy who are already retired in The United Methodist Church can become retired clergy in the GMC or LMX if they are acceptable to the new denomination. In such a case, they will retain all retirement benefits through Wespeth. Retired clergy who join the GMC or LMX will not remain in the Michigan Conference health care plan or receive supplemental coverage.

## Can retired clergy join the GMC and/or LMX and remain a member of the Michigan Conference?

No. You cannot be a member of both denominations.

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

First, make sure you have all the best information. Disaffiliation is an emotionally charged conversation, and there is a lot of speculation and inaccurate 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 be 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](mailto: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](#)

[The Michigan Conference](#)

[News](#)

[General Conference](#)

[Disaffiliation](#)

[Wespath](#)

[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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