



Conference leaders adopt process through which local churches can discern their future in mission and ministry

Local Church Discernment Process now available as “a faithful step forward”

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To ensure congregations are equipped to make decisions that enable them to best live into their disciple-making mission, South Carolina Conference leaders have adopted a process through which a local church can discern whether it will continue in ministry within The United Methodist Church or separate from the denomination.

The Local Church Discernment Process is designed to help local churches determine whether they can function as a United Methodist church if they firmly believe that the denomination has not consistently upheld its stated doctrine on issues of human sexuality. It will provide an opportunity for church members to engage in dialogue, to allow every voice in the congregation an opportunity to be heard, and to discern the congregation’s sentiment regarding separation.

The new process is distinct from the disaffiliation pathway created when the 2019 General Conference added [Paragraph 2553](#) to The UMC Book of Discipline. In South Carolina, no local church that has inquired about disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church has qualified under this provision, since they do not profess to disagree with the human sexuality language in the Book of Discipline or how the South Carolina Conference has interpreted it.

“It has been my hope that the division so present in the rest of the denomination would not affect us in a negative way,” said Bishop L. Jonathan Holston. “But it has become increasingly difficult over time to shield South Carolina United Methodists from these distractions.

“There are a growing number of churches in our conference inquiring about a way to leave the denomination, especially since disaffiliation under Paragraph 2553 is not available to them. While this is a source of real sadness, I have concluded that providing churches the space for conversation and discernment is a faithful step forward within the provisions of The Book of Discipline.”

The Trustees of the Annual Conference and the Extended Cabinet have prayerfully developed the Local Church Discernment Process. Their intentional and meticulous work is not intended to encourage churches to leave the denomination or to remain with The United Methodist Church. Rather, it was designed with the singular goal of ensuring that churches will be fruitful in their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

While similar to the disaffiliation process found in Paragraph 2553, the Local Church Discernment Process is grounded in [Paragraph 2549](#) of the Discipline, which is typically employed when a local church is closed because it no longer serves the purpose for which it was organized. Unlike the disaffiliation process, the Local Church Discernment Process has no long-term “sunset” provision.

The process consists of multiple steps, including but not limited to:

- 1) If the church council of a local church determines that it is in the best interest of the church to allow the congregation to pursue separation, the council must ask the district superintendent to call a church conference.
- 2) Before the church conference takes place, the local church must complete an intentional, 30-day process of discernment to consider whether the congregation can continue to function as a United Methodist church.
- 3) Representatives of the congregation will be assigned the responsibility of ensuring that certain financial obligations – as calculated by conference trustees – are satisfied before the congregation can vote on whether to separate. These payments include:
 - A tithe equal to 10 percent of the appraised value of all church property and liquid assets.
 - All unpaid apportionment giving for the prior year, as well as for the year of closure up to the date of the Annual Conference vote to close the church.
 - An additional 12 months of apportionment giving.
 - All unpaid salary and benefits due to clergy appointed to the church.
 - A withdrawal liability equal to the church’s proportional share of any unfunded pension obligations.
- 4) Other financial considerations and legal liabilities of the local church – such as the disposition of any debts, loans, leases, endowments, foundations and cemeteries – must be satisfied or transferred to a new entity.

- 5) At the church conference meeting, support of two-thirds of professing church members present and voting is required to formally declare that the church can no longer continue to function as a United Methodist church. This vote must take place by March 1 each year to be considered by Annual Conference members during their regular session the following June.
- 6) Once all terms of separation are satisfied, the members of the Annual Conference must vote on a resolution to close the local church and transfer its assets to a new entity. A simple majority vote in favor of the resolution is the final step before the local church separates from The United Methodist Church, maintaining its property.

All inquiries about the Local Church Discernment Process must be communicated by the church council to the district superintendent.

Bishop Holston continues to implore South Carolina United Methodists to remain patient and focused on what should be the top priority of every local church – our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

“During this time of discernment, I am encouraging everyone to pray for our church and for each other, to trust in the Lord with all your heart and not lean only on your own understanding,” Bishop Holston said. “Amid all of the distractions the world casts across our path, let us seek a more excellent way to focus on what matters most – trusting, believing and knowing that God is with us.”

Resources to aid in discernment

- [“Guidelines for Holy Conferencing”](#) (Inspired by John Wesley)
- [“Courageous Conversations Regarding the Future of the UMC”](#) (Discipleship Ministries)
- [“What it Means to ‘Be UMC’”](#) (Resource UMC)
- [“Visioning: What is the Next Step?”](#) (Resource UMC)
- [“Planning Inspired by the Spirit”](#) (Lewis Center for Church Leadership)