

# Bethany Update on the UMC Denomination

## Background and Frequently Asked Questions

August 2022

### Summary

In the last several years, the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the United Methodist Church (UMC) has reached a point where the conversation has become about HOW (not if) the denomination will split. This has been a challenging time for the denomination and our local church, as devout Christians from both sides have been divided on issues related to human sexuality as well as church polity and doctrine. Bethany has been actively navigating these challenging times for several years, seeking more clarity from both the Lord and from earthly authorities on the best way for our congregation to move forward. This summer, the number of churches publicly making their intentions known has dramatically increased. The Bethany congregation will need to enter a decision-making process on whether to stay or leave the UMC, but leadership has decided it is best to continue to wait until more information is available. This document attempts to give an overview of the current situation and some rationale for our decision to wait.

### Brief History

Since there has been a Church, there have been philosophical/theological differences among its members. The United Methodist Church (UMC) has had its share since it united multiple Methodist denominations in 1968. Some of these have been substantial, but none as divisive as the topic of LGBTQ+ marriage and clergy.

The current position of the UMC, as governed by our rules known as the “Book of Discipline”, is that all people are individuals of sacred worth. But it does not support same gender marriage nor the ordination of practicing homosexuals. There are those who agree with these rules, often known as Traditionalists, those who completely oppose these rules, known as Progressives, and even those who fall somewhere in the middle and often refer to themselves as Centrists.

The legislative body of the worldwide UMC, known as the General Conference, is responsible for making any changes to our rules, and it meets every four years. No other entity or person is allowed to speak for the denomination or make changes to the rules except this worldwide body that convenes every four years. Because of the ongoing disagreements about LGBTQ+ marriage and clergy, the General Conference was scheduled to meet in the Summer of 2020 to discuss various plans that might result in a division of the denomination into one or more new denominations. As the pandemic disrupted all travel, this meeting was postponed to 2021, then to 2022, and now to 2024.

### Current Situation

In the midst of this delay of the General Conference, some US congregations, typically with strong majority opinions (both traditional and progressive), have started discussing whether they will leave the UMC. One development that is currently getting quite a bit of attention is the

recent launch of a new “traditionalist” denomination called the Global Methodist Church (GMC). Some congregations have already decided to leave the UMC in favor of the new GMC. Likewise, other UMC congregations are making plans to leave the UMC for more progressive denominations. However, many congregations, especially those with mixed viewpoints like Bethany, are seeking more clarity to guide their next steps.

### **Bethany’s Response**

The Lead Team believes it is premature for Bethany to make any decisions related to our staying or leaving the UMC, as BOTH options have significant unknowns. Leaving the UMC, regardless of the destination, has uncertain financial, property, and legal implications. Deciding to remain in the UMC also has many uncertainties, as the landscape of the worldwide general conference is very much in flux. With so many important details still uncertain, we believe we should wait to enter any decision-making process. In the meantime, the Lead Team is actively working to stay abreast of the ever-changing nuances of this situation and are working to compile resources for you that provide balanced perspectives.

Any significant decision for the future of our church should be carefully considered with sufficient time, prayer, thought and conversations. In the future, we will have information sessions to inform the congregation about developments as they arise and solicit feedback. Throughout such a process, we will strive to be transparent and open, doing our best to help you understand the pros and cons of any decisions.

### **Congregation’s Call to Action**

The most important thing we can do is to pray for wisdom and discernment. In this time of waiting, it’s essential to remember that we are called together to be brothers and sisters in Christ, and to be the light of Christ in a world that increasingly needs it. We must continue to bear fruit and be in communion with one another to reach others for God’s kingdom. There is so much work to do in this world and in our own neighborhood, to further the Kingdom of God. We remind you of the “HEART Principle” from “Partners in Ministry” that states, “Even when we disagree, please don’t make me wrong.” In the same way a clergy person in another conference has encouraged their congregation, we are calling upon our Bethany family to pray, listen, learn, discern, and not to “borrow anxiety” as we move through these days.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## General Information

### **1. Why are some churches choosing to leave the United Methodist Church (UMC) and others choosing to stay?**

Those churches choosing to remain in the UMC typically believe that the diversity of thought is a strength, and that the church's theology needs to evolve with society. They recognize that bishops, clergy, and general agencies are not abiding by parts of the *Discipline*, but believe those actions are small and have always been a part of the UMC. They interpret the conflict and disagreements at the General Conferences as a necessary part of how we are emerging to be relevant to the world.

Those choosing to move to the Global Methodist Church typically believe that the current theology of the church should not be altered, and that clergy and bishops should uphold the established theology of the church. They also expect that the structure in the GMC will reduce the financial burden on local churches. They sometimes believe that the conflict within the UMC reflects a failure of leadership and an irreparable brokenness in the church's institutional structure.

### **2. Is Bethany being asked to split?**

You may hear the term “split” as some local churches decide to leave the denomination. And that can quickly lead you to ask this question. But no, Bethany is not splitting. We will continue to do the work God calls us to do together here at Bethany. We, the pastors and Lead Team of Bethany strongly prefer that we stay united in helping people to experience God's love, know Jesus Christ, and grow in His image.

### **3. What is a discernment period?**

Discernment is a period of understanding the congregation, hearing from your membership about their hopes for the future and determining where God is calling your church. This process is grounded in information, communication, and prayer.

### **4. Do we have to enter a period of discernment if we already know what we want?**

There are differing viewpoints at Bethany, and it is important that everyone is given an opportunity to be heard and ultimately given the opportunity to vote on the direction they would like Bethany to take. So, while you may be surrounded by a set of like-minded people in your small groups, it is important to realize that not everyone at Bethany is in agreement on the direction the church might take. In addition, per the rules of our Annual Conference, we are required to enter a period of discernment if we want to consider an option that would involve leaving.

**5. Are we required to enter a discernment period? Are we required to call for a vote? Can we stay neutral? What happens if we do nothing?**

Churches are not required to enter a discernment period or call for a vote. Choosing not to do so is a decision to simply remain part of the UMC. **Because there are many viewpoints at Bethany and we believe our members deserve a time to share their thoughts, the Lead Team currently believes that, once we have some additional information, we should enter a discernment period.** When that time comes, the Lead Team will recommend to the Administrative Board that we enter that discernment period to help us determine whether we wish to remain part of the UMC or leave it. At that time, for us to begin a discernment process, the Administrative Board would have to vote in a simple majority to move forward with that six-month process.

**6. What happens if we stay in the UMC?**

Bethany would continue to lead people to Experience God's Love, Know Jesus Christ, and Grow in His image. We do not anticipate making any major changes in ministry.

While it's not clear what changes might occur in the UMC, it's likely that the UMC will not look the same five years from now. Many ideas for unity, separation, and governance have been proposed, but none can be enacted until the next General Conference, currently scheduled for 2024.

The UMC is a global denomination, with the fastest growth occurring in Africa. African conferences are significantly traditional. If they remain in the UMC while many western churches leave, they could achieve supermajority voting rights within the UMC. Thus, it could ultimately be Africa that holds significant sway over decisions at General Conference 2024.

**7. What happens if we were to vote to disaffiliate?**

Bethany would continue to lead people to Experience God's Love, Know Jesus Christ, and Grow in His image. Again, we do not anticipate making any major changes in ministry.

Two big questions related to disaffiliation often arise - the financial impact and where we might go.

Financially there are several unknowns. The cost to disaffiliate could include an amount to complete Bethany's apportionment for the given year, plus an amount to support Bethany's fair share of any unfunded pension liability. There would probably also be some legal fees involved for amendments to legal documents. While we know that many people would really like to see a specific number, it is simply too early to provide that. We will provide more specific information and amounts when we feel we have reliable information.

Disaffiliation could take several forms, all requiring congregational information meetings and a congregational vote. The current disaffiliation policy of the Rio Texas Conference requires a 66% vote from members of our church, which would be taken after the six-month discernment process. Possible options could include:

- Join another Methodist denomination, such as the newly formed Global Methodist Church or the Free Methodist Church
- Become an independent church
- Join a non-Methodist denomination

**8. I hear a lot of other churches are already voting. Why are we different?**

Each annual conference sets their own policy and timelines for disaffiliation. So, the timelines vary widely across the state and nation. What is occurring in another area is not necessarily relevant for our area. In addition, some churches are much more aligned with one position or another. Bethany has greater diversity of opinion on just about any issue and will need more time to become informed and make any decisions. Bethany is part of the Rio Texas Conference, which includes churches in Austin, west to San Angelo, east to Victoria, and all the Rio Grande Valley, and we must adhere to their policies.

**9. When will Bethany enter a discernment process and what will it look like?**

As stated earlier, the Lead Team does not believe it is time to enter a discernment process just yet, as we are waiting until we understand some things better. But we do anticipate asking the Administrative Board to vote to begin this process sometime in late 2022 or 2023, unless something changes significantly.

Should the Administrative Board vote to begin a discernment process, we expect that this process will include an extended period of time where we ask people to pray for the church, followed by an information session where we will invite experts from outside of Bethany to speak to our congregation, some listening sessions where members will be invited to share their opinions, an additional time of prayer, and ultimately a congregational meeting, where members will be asked to vote on what direction they believe God is leading the church.

**10. What is the “trust clause” I’ve heard about, and who owns church buildings and property in the United Methodist Church?**

Keeping it simple, the Conference has a limited ownership position in our church buildings and properties via the "trust clause." If we were to decide to leave the denomination with our property, we would need to be released from the "trust clause." There is disagreement within the various states in terms of whether a state court will enforce the trust clause. If, as is the case in some states, the state courts won't enforce the trust clause, it means that the local church is free to retain their property without cost, should they decide to leave the United Methodist Church. If the state courts do enforce the trust clause, it means that a local church wanting to leave the denomination might have to pay the officials of the denomination the value of the local church property or some other agreed upon amount to retain the property. Texas law is currently undecided about this. One thing we have learned from other denominations is that disputes can quickly become quite expensive, draining money that is needed for ministry.

**11. For churches that leave the UMC, what happens to their relationships with the agencies, historic institutions, and ministries that they support and work with (Methodist Children's Home, UMCOR, Hill Country Ministries, Emmaus, Kairos, etc.)?**

Many local churches support organizations at the local level, and those relationships would not need to change. For instance, Bethany currently works with Hill Country Ministries and World Vision at a local level, so regardless of what denomination Bethany might ultimately be a part of, those relationships would not need to change. Many local churches also support organizations that are organized by their denomination, like UMCOR. Those relationships might be affected, depending on which denomination a church decided to be a part of. It is important to understand that in any time of institutional upheaval there can likely be many changes regardless of what we decide as a local church, since boards and agencies of the UMC will all be affected in some way.

## **12. Who should I contact if I have more questions?**

If you have additional questions, you can reach out to a pastor directly or submit a question from the link on the [bethany-umc.org/umcupdates](https://bethany-umc.org/umcupdates) page.