

A Discernment Process for Local Churches Considering Disaffiliation Under Paragraph 2553

Because this is such an enormous decision for a local church family, you will find here a helpful process of discernment for every church that considers disaffiliating with the United Methodist Church.

Your Bishop and Cabinet are expecting such congregations to engage in a true spiritual discernment process beginning with prayerful, biblical, theological reflection within the context of Christian Conferencing as taught by our founder, John Wesley.

Following are some foundational principles for a congregation to consider when entering into this discernment together. These are followed by the actual step-by-step process for each church considering such a momentous decision. The discernment process here is not established as the only path, but is offered as one way to faithfully address the need to engage the congregation.

Christian discernment is, at its heart, an openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit guiding us in the truth of Jesus Christ (John 14:26; 16:12-13). It is not about coming together with a pre-conceived outcome in mind, defending what we think or want, but being open to the living word God is speaking to us in this moment.

Discernment involves quieting our own inner talk, admitting and setting aside our pre-conceptions, cultivating a spirit of peace rather than anxiety or fear (“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear” - I John 4:18) listening for God to speak through, scripture, illumined by prayer, human experience, Christian tradition, reasoned reflection, and those in the room with us.

For a biblical example of the early Church doing discernment work addressing a major contentious issue (whether to include uncircumcised Gentiles in the Church or first require obedience to Jewish law/tradition), turn to Acts 11:1-18 and Acts 15:1-21.

Here are some suggested elements for the discernment process:

- Begin and end each session in prayer; regularly stop throughout for more prayer ...
- Shed our expectations and preconceived “answers” or “positions” (Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.”)
- Commit to Jesus having the last word, even if that means there is a change in us. (“If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God’s way?” - Acts 11:17)
- Listen to one another respectfully – expect the Holy Spirit will speak through others in the room. As they speak, do not formulate your next response to “win the point;” but go slow enough to restate what you have heard them say to be clear you understand. Seek first to understand before you are understood. Only then, speak for yourself. Avoid speaking for others.
- Speak the truth in love with kindness and gentleness.
- Identify what those in the room hear the Holy Spirit saying.
- Examine or test what the truth is we are hearing.
- Sit together in silence.
- Test for consensus in the room by filling in the apostles’ statement (Acts 15:28 “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us to _____”.)

- Before ending the session, identify follow-up steps and who will be responsible for doing that work.

Since disaffiliation will ultimately require a Church Conference (all professing members will vote on disaffiliation) it is imperative that all members participate in discernment together.

Utilizing the above general principles for discernment, it is suggested that each congregation will:

Read this passage prior to starting each session:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. [Colossians 3:12-16a,17]

1. Read together and reflect upon Part III of our 2016 United Methodist Book of Discipline, "Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task" (paragraphs 102 – 105) pp.47-80. Then state in writing your congregation' response to our Doctrinal Standards and "Our Theological Task".
2. Then, on a separate day/time, led by someone who has read either *Holy Love*, by Steve Harper or *Changing Our Mind*, by David P. Gushee, discuss the book chosen. These are two thoughtful, widely-respected evangelical scholars who have wrestled with this issue and come to change their mind.

Then, in light of your reading and discussion, and in accordance with Paragraph 2553, state in writing a) What do you believe is the essential teaching of Jesus about this issue? And b) What is your position on the issues of homosexuality and/or the ordination of homosexual persons? This may not be a uniform position throughout the congregation; in which case, write a statement sufficient to help the Bishop and Cabinet know what you are thinking.

3. Then, after #2 above, on a separate day, host a UM clergy or layperson, identified by your Conference Superintendent, to hear the "case" for remaining United Methodist.
4. After the above steps are completed, it is suggested that the congregation spend 30 days in prayerful Holy Conferencing, praying together, reflecting on your readings and conversations, discussing what you have learned.
5. After such time, if the Administrative Council or Governing Board determines that the congregation desires to take a vote, contact your Conference Superintendent to start that process.