

Details On Current Matters within the United Methodist Church



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Questions & Answers

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From Rev. Andrew Chappell

Senior Minister of Newnan First United Methodist Church

God has richly blessed us in this season of our church's story. Thanks to your generosity, we are truly living our core values in every sense. From a growing membership and strong programming to selfless missional service and outreach, the future is big and bright at Newnan First United Methodist Church. We are continuing to grow in number, in depth, and in our community outreach.

This booklet is part of our ongoing conversation around several important topics related to our larger United Methodist family and how those topics pertain to our congregation, specifically around the matters related to marriage and ordination of LGBTQ persons. This booklet is designed to be an educational tool for this particular season in our story. I encourage you to use this booklet as a discernment guide and a prayer prompt.

As your pastor, I am here to listen, pray, discern, and walk with you as we have this conversation. My role is to lead you through it so that NFUMC can remain a place where, together, we may continue connecting people to Jesus, growing in the knowledge of our Lord, and using our unique gifts of the Spirit to make a difference in our corner of the world and beyond.

In 1990, my grandfather, a United Methodist pastor, baptized me in front of a congregation at Inman United Methodist Church. In that baptism, my family vowed in covenant before their spiritual family that they would care for me in the church and teach me the faith so that one day I might make the decision to follow Jesus for myself.

In 2001, I stood with my confirmation class in front of Lawrenceville First United Methodist Church and vowed in covenant to be loyal with my prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. I was only eleven years old at the time. Over time, God's grace in my life continued to take shape and God helped me grow. That growth took place in the United Methodist Church. From that moment of covenantal origins, the United Methodist Church worked to affirm my spiritual gifts and help me understand a call to ministry that took shape over many years.

In 2021, after 10 years of preparation, I was ordained in the United Methodist Church, and I pledged loyalty to uphold our Book of Discipline. All of these are covenantal relationships. My life has been shaped by and committed to serving Jesus Christ through the United Methodist Church. This is my story; this is my song. You likely have your own story and song about your commitment to Jesus Christ and your covenant with the United Methodist Church. Therefore, it affects all of us that our denomination finds itself in the midst of division. Not only do our personal stories stand to be impacted by the fracturing of our denomination, but also, I know so many of you have United Methodist roots that run deeply throughout your family's story. The times in which we find ourselves are intensely personal. We are on this journey together, and I want this booklet to help guide our conversations.

Our intention is to communicate the current state of the UMC and acknowledge what we know and do not know about the future. Over the course of the last year and a half, we have worked to communicate through Q&A sessions. We will have another session on October 25. We will take questions electronically until October 12. Feel free to submit any questions you might have at newnanfumc.org/questions. We will seek to answer as many as we can at the end of October. I am thankful to Rev. Dr. Jay Cooper from FUMC in Montgomery for allowing us access to his booklet as a guide in creating this booklet for NFUMC.

I ask for your patience, grace, and trust. It is an absolute honor to be your pastor for such a time as this. In return, you will receive my full attention and energy as we walk together.

With Joy,

Rev. Andrew Chappell



How did we get here?

From the time John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" at Aldersgate Street in 1738, the "people called Methodists" have evolved into who we are today, the United Methodist Church, with a commitment to "spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land." The UMC was formed in 1968, and for the last 50 years, the UMC has had conversations regarding LGBTQ marriage and ordination rites. Every four years since 1972, this has been a topic of conversation at the General Conference.¹ As stated in the Book of Discipline,² the position of the UMC on homosexuality has not changed.³ But at the 2019 General Conference, the Book of Discipline changed to the most punitive language on this matter specific to violations of the Book of Discipline.⁴

At this same General Conference, paragraph 2553 was also passed, which gives grounds for a church to leave the UMC on different beliefs in regard to human sexuality. (See back of the booklet for specifics on disaffiliation.) It is the only recognized pathway of disaffiliation that will allow a local church to retain its property. This paragraph, however, allows for disaffiliation "from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow." This paragraph was designed with our current situation in mind. A church-wide vote at a called Church Conference would decide if a local church would pursue disaffiliation, according to paragraph 2553.

In 2020, Bishop John Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference called together leaders at different ends of the theological spectrum to determine what it means for a local church to reach a healthy separation from the United Methodist Church. This resulted in *The Protocol for Grace and Reconciliation through Separation*, known as *The Protocol*. Traditionalist leaders sought to continue the church's prohibition on LGBTQ marriages and ordinations in the UMC. Progressive leaders sought to remove such prohibitions.

Many believed *The Protocol* was the means of closure to these bitter disagreements. However, just months after *The Protocol* was introduced, our world was changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The regular General Conference set for Spring 2020, where *The Protocol* would be reviewed, was postponed to 2021, 2022, and, in March of this year, 2024. With each postponement, the likelihood of its adoption lessened.

On May 1, 2022, the Global Methodist Church, the likely resultant traditionalist denomination coming from legislation connected with *The Protocol*, launched. Since that time, drafters and supporters of *The Protocol* have disavowed their support of this legislation for separation. In other words, there is no current legislation for separation to present to General Conference 2024. Whether new legislation will be drafted and presented or if a local church decides to take an alternative route for separation, the current stance on LGBTQ marriage and ordination remains the same: LGBTQ marriage and ordination are not allowed within the church, clergy can be punished for performing LGBTQ weddings or engaging in homosexuality, and our denomination does not condone homosexuality.

Is the UMC splitting?

No, but there are individual local churches disaffiliating from the UMC.

How does disaffiliation work?

In the North Georgia Annual Conference of the UMC, paragraph 2553 is the disciplinary basis on which a local church may disaffiliate from the UMC. Here are a few things to consider that influence the enactment of paragraph 2553: (See back of booklet for specifics on disaffiliation)

1. There is a cost associated with the disaffiliation based on a formula adopted by our Annual Conference. This formula includes, in part, a calculation based on apportionments and unfunded pension liabilities.
2. There is a time frame for a local church to initiate disaffiliation based on paragraph 2553. As of now, that time frame expires on December 31, 2023.
3. In the event of disaffiliation, John Wesley's Trust Clause would be

revoked. Each church, like a congregational system, would retain its property.

How does this relate to Newnan First UMC?

Our congregation, at 194 years old, is a theologically diverse church. We are typical of many medium to large churches in Methodism. On a given Sunday, we worship alongside parishioners of diverse political and ideological beliefs: who are liberal, conservative, vocal, silent, Republican, Democrat, Independent, patient, impatient, sinner, and saint. We study together in Sunday school and sing together in choir with people who think differently than we think. We serve our local and foreign mission partners alongside persons of varying theological persuasions. We truly are a big tent!

That said, our membership cares deeply for our local church. Due to diverse views within our flock, we have members who want us to remain United Methodist and members who would consider disaffiliating to other Methodist expressions. Some of these include the Free Methodist Church, the Global Methodist Church (GMC), and the progressive Methodist expression. Still, others are committed to FUMC regardless of denominational affiliation. Engaging one another remains important for God's Kingdom, our community, our Annual Conference, and our NFUMC family.

Are options available to NFUMC?

Of course. Possible paths for us are as follows:

- ♦ Remain United Methodist.
- ♦ Wait for an outcome and discern following the 2024 General Conference, where potential new legislation relating to these matters could receive attention.
- ♦ Disaffiliate from the UMC and:
 1. Join the Global Methodist Church.
 2. Join a different evangelical denomination.
 3. Become an independent church.

? If there is substantial interest in disaffiliation, who votes, when, and how?

After initiating the process with the Senior Minister, the District Superintendent (DS) would be informed, and a discernment process would ensue. A vote might or might not be a result of this process. The discernment process is as follows:

1. Pray.
2. Inform the congregation and have the opportunity for substantive conversation.
3. Invite all persons who are professing members of the church.
4. Give enough notice that each person has been adequately notified in order to ensure a healthy process.

Some decisions in the local church can only be made at a Church Conference. The decision on whether to disaffiliate is one of these decisions. A Church conference would be called at which all professing members of NFUMC would be eligible to vote. Currently, this number is around 2200. You must be present to vote. The threshold for disaffiliation is a 2/3 majority of those present.

? Additional considerations?

Yes. We must be mindful that our community and the world are onlooking. The local church has the unique opportunity to model healthy forms of conflict resolution, to rise above our disagreements for the good of the whole, and to love each other even when discussions become lively. There are no winners and losers. We are part of a BIG family.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to attend the Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis. I met Methodists of all shapes and sizes, of all beliefs and concerns. I watched my brother and sisters begin so well, in kindness and love of God. I then watched as so many of my friends on all sides became angry and distrustful.

My prayer is that we not only begin well, but we finish well too! Like siblings who argue, I pray we will remain brothers and sisters who figure out a way to move forward together. There is indeed a spiritual element to this discussion and I believe God is working in all of it.

There is no perfect church or perfect pastor. There is only a perfect savior, Jesus, who taught us to die to ourselves for the sake of others. May we practice the life of Jesus as we continue in this discussion and may God's will be known through our flock as a shining light for Newnan!

What should we do next?

Intentionally be in loving conversation with others in the congregation, especially those whose perspectives may be different from your own. Then, actively participate in the things listed below. Your questions are welcome, and your voice is valued.

Submit your questions to us either through the online form or by paper. We ask that your questions be submitted by October 12 in order to allow time for our leaders to gather the correct information.

Attend the Town Hall Meeting with Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson, hosted by Peachtree City UMC on October 19 at 6:30 pm.

Attend the Current Matters for Newnan First UMC meeting. This meeting will include our Pastors, Board of Trustees and Council President, as well as retired pastor and former chair of the North Georgia Board of Trustees, John Simmons.

Newnan First UMC Sanctuary Talk
Tuesday, October 25 | Sanctuary | 6:30 pm

Please join us!

Footnotes

1 General Conference: The highest legislative body in the United Methodist Church. The voting membership consists of an equal number of clergy and lay delegates elected by the annual conferences. General Conference convenes every quadrennium (four years) to determine the denomination's future direction. It is the only body that can speak officially for the denomination.

2 A fundamental book outlining the law, doctrine, administration, organizational work and procedures of the United Methodist Church. Each General Conference amends The Book of Discipline, and the actions of the General Conference are reflected in the quadrennial revision. Often referred to as The Discipline.

3 From the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016*

Paragraph 161 (G) - Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage... We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God... The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teachings.

From the *Book of Discipline*: ¶2553. Disaffiliation of a Local Church Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality.

1. Because of the current deep conflict within the United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.

2. Time Limits.

The choice by a local church to disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church under this paragraph shall be made in sufficient time for the process for exiting the denomination to be complete prior to December 31, 2023. The provisions of ¶ 2553 expire on December 31, 2023, and shall not be used after that date.

3. Decision-Making Process.

The church conference shall be conducted in accordance with ¶ 248 and shall be held within one hundred twenty (120) days after the district superintendent calls for the church conference. In addition to the provisions of ¶ 246.8, special attention shall be made to give broad notice to the full professing membership of the local church regarding the time and place of a church conference called for this purpose and to use all means necessary, including electronic communication where possible, to communicate. 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.

4. Process Following Decision to Disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church.

If the church conference votes to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church, the terms and conditions for that disaffiliation shall be established by the board of trustees of the applicable annual conference, with the advice of the cabinet, the annual conference treasurer, the annual conference benefits officer, the director of connectional ministries, and the annual conference chancellor.

The terms and conditions, including the effective date of disaffiliation, shall be memorialized in a binding Disaffiliation Agreement between the annual conference and the trustees of the local church, acting on behalf of the members. That agreement must be consistent with the following provisions:

a) Standard Terms of the Disaffiliation Agreement.

The General Council on Finance and Administration shall develop a standard form for Disaffiliation Agreements under this paragraph to protect The United Methodist Church as set forth in ¶ 807.9. The agreement shall include a recognition of the validity and applicability of ¶ 2501, notwithstanding the release of property therefrom. Annual conferences may develop additional standard terms that are not inconsistent with the standard form of this paragraph.

b) Apportionments.

The local church shall pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of apportionments.

c) Property.

A disaffiliating local church shall have the right to retain its real and personal, tangible and intangible property. All transfers of property shall be made prior to disaffiliation. All costs for transfer of title or other legal work shall be borne by the disaffiliating local church.

d) Pension Liabilities.

The local church shall contribute withdrawal liability in an amount equal to its pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference. The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits shall determine the aggregate funding obligations of the annual conference using market factors similar to a commercial annuity provider, from which the annual conference will determine the local church's share.

e) Other Liabilities.

The local church shall satisfy all other debts, loans, and liabilities, or assign and transfer them to its new entity, prior to disaffiliation.

f) Payment Terms.

Payment shall occur prior to the effective date of departure.

g) Disaffiliating Churches Continuing as Plan Sponsors of the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits Plans.

The United Methodist Church believes that a local church disaffiliating under ¶2553 shall continue to share common religious bonds and convictions with The United Methodist Church based on shared Wesleyan theology and tradition and Methodist roots unless the local church expressly resolves to the contrary. As such, a local church disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 shall continue to be eligible to sponsor voluntary employee benefit plans through the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits under ¶ 1504.2, subject to the applicable terms and conditions of the plans.

h) Once the disaffiliating local church has reimbursed the applicable annual conference for all funds due under the agreement, and provided that there are no other outstanding liabilities or claims against The United Methodist Church as a result of the disaffiliation, in consideration of the provisions of this paragraph, the applicable annual conference shall release any claims that it may have under ¶ 2501 and other paragraphs of The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church commonly referred to as the trust clause, or under the agreement.

i) **Dates and Deadlines in North Georgia.**

- Churches that discern that they would like to request a church conference to vote on disaffiliation will make their request to their District Superintendent. Superintendents will receive requests between January 1 and February 28, 2023. After February 28, church conferences will be scheduled by the District Superintendent. The schedule will be set to ensure completion and efficiency (scheduling will not be based on the order in which requests are made). There is no advantage or disadvantage to requesting earlier or later in the window.
- Note that the district superintendents will not receive any disaffiliation requests from any church prior to the 1st of January. And they will not receive any disaffiliation requests after February 28th.

Reflection and Questions

Your notes, reflections, and questions below.

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