

The history of The United Methodist Church is the product of more than a few splits, separations, and reconciliations. The formation of The Methodist Episcopal Church—a predecessor denomination of The United Methodist Church—was itself a split from the Church of England. In 1784, John Wesley went against his own tradition's ordination standards and ordained Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey to go to the United States, where they would ordain Francis Asbury. Coke and Asbury would become the main leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States.

One of the first groups to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church because of its racist policies were Black Methodists in Philadelphia, led by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. They left St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, in 1787 and formed the Free African Society, which would grow and become the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

With a current body of over 12 million members globally, United Methodists are not of one mind and for decades we have been in disagreement with one another about how to be in ministry with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.

Currently, the Church officially affirms that all people are of sacred worth and are equally valuable in the sight of God. It is committed to being in ministry with all people. The Church “implores families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends.”

Underlying this is the constitutional principle of inclusiveness of the church. Everyone is welcome to worship and actively participate in the life of our churches. Laypersons may become members and live out their faith through their local church without respect for sexual orientation or practice.

The Church deplores acts of hate and violence against people based on sexual orientation or gender identity and believes human rights and civil liberties are due to all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Homosexuality was first openly debated at General Conference in 1972, four years after the formation of The United Methodist Church, resulting in the addition of the first statement on homosexuality. While affirming the belief that persons of homosexual orientation are persons of sacred worth who need the ministry and guidance of the church, the statement added that the church “does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Since then, the church has officially maintained that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” This draws a distinction between orientation and practice, or behavior. Sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

The May 1984 General Conference in Baltimore amended the *Book of Discipline* to state that “no self-avowed, practicing homosexual shall be ordained or appointed in the United Methodist Church.” Based on these positions about homosexual practice and marriage, the Church has also maintained that Pastors may not conduct ceremonies that celebrate same-sex weddings or unions. Such ceremonies also may not be held on church property.

While the church has official statements regarding homosexuality, all members can disagree with the church's positions and can advocate for change in policy. That process happens through General Conference*, the only body that speaks officially for the church.

Thus, immediately following the vote on the ordination ban, a small group gathered outside the Civic

Center in Baltimore and passed out brochures to General Conference delegates and visitors inviting their congregations to become Reconciling Congregations (RCs), in essence to dissent from the policies approved by The UMC.

In 2019, the members of Washington Street UMC went through a discernment process and became a Reconciling congregation. This means, our congregation is committed to engaging in the ministry of Reconciliation in two ways:

- Outreach, affirmation, and intersectional ministry with and for LGBTQIA+ persons in the local setting.
- Creating opportunities to engage in dialogue, build relationships, and advocate for changes to Church policies related to ordination equality, marriage equality, and the availability of funds that help make LGBTQIA+ justice a reality.

When the next General Conference convenes (April 23 - May 3, 2024) it will address multiple legislative proposals to alter existing church policies (in both more exclusive and more inclusive directions) and proposals to divide or restructure the denomination as a result of differences related to the church's official position about homosexual practice and marriage and other issues. There is no way to predict at this time how that General Conference may respond to proposals related to restructure or separation.

This uncertainty about the denomination's future has led to calls by some for congregations to separate from the denomination. Most recently, more than 2,000 churches in the USA chose to disaffiliate from The UMC under a provision in the current *Book of Discipline***, Paragraph 2553. The ability to disaffiliate under that paragraph expired at the end of 2022.

On December 19, 2022, our Bishop, Jonathan Holston, issued a press release to ensure United Methodist congregations in SC are equipped to make decisions that enable them to best live into their disciple-making mission. In the press release he stated:

“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*.”

Thus, in conjunction with the Trustees of the Annual Conference and the Extended Cabinet, our Bishop has developed a Local Church Discernment Process. 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. Details related to this multi step process can be found at www.umcsc.org/discern.

It is important to note that action is not required by every church to make a decision to separate from or to remain with The United Methodist Church. Only churches seeking to discern separation need to engage in this process.

Because there continues to be a lot of confusion and misinformation disseminated about what all this means for local congregations like Washington Street UMC, I have invited our District Superintendent,

The Rev. Fran Elrod, to meet with us on **Sunday evening, January 22nd at 6:00 pm in our Sanctuary.**

We will livestream the session for those who are not able to attend in person. Please contact Jane Peterson (jane@wsmethodist.org) for the livestream link.

Rev. Elrod's time with us is designed to provide space for us to ask questions and allow her to clarify any misunderstandings while providing us with up-to-date and accurate information. It will be helpful to our time together if you are able to submit your questions to me in writing before Sunday. You may email them to rjshirley@umcsc.org.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message and for your continued prayers for God's guidance and grace.

Prayerfully, Becky

*To learn more about the General conference, visit
<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/what-is-the-general-conference>

***The Book of Discipline is the current statement of how United Methodists agree to live together. It includes our church Constitution, our history, our doctrinal standards, and our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, as well as practical processes through which our congregations are organized and clergy is ordained.*