



CENTRAL

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Frequently Asked Questions

Q What is Discernment?

A Discernment is a process of prayerful contemplation and deliberation in an effort to seek God's will.

Q Why did Central's Church Council vote to enter the discernment process when the results of our church survey seemed to indicate our church is evenly divided on issues of human sexuality?

A The Church Council did not believe that they should decide the question of whether to stay in the United Methodist Church denomination on behalf of the entire congregation. The Council expressed that this decision belongs in the hands of the church membership, after they have had the opportunity to go through the full discernment process. The Council's decision was reinforced by the survey results, since they showed not only deep division in the congregation, but also that 87% of the respondents believe we should be discussing these issues.

Q What motion did Central's Church Council adopt in September 2022 requesting to enter discernment?

A The church council approved the following resolution based on sample language furnished by the Arkansas Conference Office:

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 the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church related to these issues that follow, we, the Central United Methodist Church, under the authority of ¶ 2553 of The 2016 Book of Discipline and the "Principles Regarding Local Church Requests for Disaffiliation" ratified by the 2021 Arkansas Annual Conference, request to begin the discernment process that may or may not lead to disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church.

Q What does disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church mean?

A If a local church disaffiliates from the United Methodist Church, it means that the church will no longer be a part of the denomination. A path and process for local churches who desire to explore separation from the denomination was provided by the 2019 General Conference in paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline, which is the denomination's compilation of law and doctrine.

The process outlines the steps the congregation, the district superintendent, and the annual conference must take to request, meet the criteria for, and complete a disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church.

Disaffiliation requires, at a minimum, three things:

- a. a decision to disaffiliate by a two-thirds majority of the professing members present at a Church Conference;
- b. the payment in full of two years (current year being current plus an extra 12 months) of that congregation's apportionment commitment as set by the Annual Conference; and
- c. the payment in full of the congregation's pro-rata share of the Annual Conference's pension liability.

Annual conferences may add to these requirements, and some have done so (see below for the Arkansas Conference process). Most require that the congregation complete a discernment process, guided by the district superintendent, before a church conference may be scheduled to consider disaffiliation. Disaffiliation is complete only when all payments due are made in full and the Annual Conference has approved the disaffiliation by a simple majority vote. At present, paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline is the only means available for local churches to disaffiliate from the denomination, and it ends on December 31, 2023. The General Conference of the UMC does not convene again until 2024. It is unknown if any new methods of disaffiliation will be approved in 2024.

Q What is a Church Conference?

A A Church Conference is a meeting that may be convened at the discretion of the District Superintendent at which all professing members of the local church may attend, and those who are present at the meeting, may have voice and vote on a matter before the church body.

Q What does the process for disaffiliation involve in the Arkansas Conference of the UMC?

A The process is initiated by the Church Council or equivalent governing body of the local church by passage of an affirmative vote to enter the Discernment Process for possible disaffiliation from the UMC. For the process to move forward, the District Superintendent, Bishop, and Appointive Cabinet of the Arkansas Conference must then certify the process. The governing body must then submit a written Discernment Plan that is in compliance with guidelines provided by the Annual Conference. For the process to continue, the District Superintendent, Bishop, and Appointive Cabinet must then certify the Discernment Plan. After certification is received, three separate Listening Sessions must be held for the local church to discern their direction in the process. The Discernment Process is to be held over a minimum 90-day period. The Discernment Process culminates with a straw poll vote, requiring simple majority approval, of the professing members present, in Listening Session III. If the straw poll vote receives simple majority approval, a Church Conference may be set at which time all Professing Members of the church are allowed to vote on whether to disaffiliate. The threshold for approval is a 2/3 majority of the Professing Members present. If either process fails to reach the required vote threshold, the process ends and Central would remain in the United Methodist Church.

Q *When are the Listening Sessions scheduled?*

A Listening Session I was held on Thursday, October 13, at 6:30 p.m. in Central's Activities Center. Arkansas Bishop Gary Mueller and NW District Superintendent Dr. Blake Bradford led the session, which sought to provide information on the discernment process and current landscape of the UMC. A time of question and answer was included.

Listening Session II is scheduled for Sunday, November 13, at 3:00 p.m. in Central's Activities Center. Central Member Chuck Culver will lead it. The primary focus at this session will be to hear presentations by Rev. Wes Hilliard (Lead Pastor of Heritage UMC Van Buren) on why Central should consider disaffiliating from the UMC and by Dr. Bud Reeves (Senior Pastor of FUMC Fort Smith) regarding why Central should consider remaining in the UMC. There will also be a time for question and answer and comments.

Listening Session III is scheduled for Sunday, January 8, at 3:00 p.m. The location has yet to be announced. Central's Church Council Chair Sally Davis will lead it. This session will include an extended time of question and answer and comments. In addition, the straw poll vote will be conducted at the end of this listening session to determine if Central will request a Church Conference vote on disaffiliation or remain in the UMC.

Q *Can the Discernment Process be paused or stopped?*

A Local churches may choose to pause or withdraw from the Discernment Process if it lacks support in the congregation. If any of the required votes (i.e., the straw poll or church conference) do not meet the required threshold for approval then the process stops and Central would remain a part of the United Methodist Church.

Q *Will the Listening Sessions be live-streamed or recorded?*

A The Arkansas Conference UMC has directed Central to not live-stream or record the listening sessions for on-demand viewing. We requested to do one or both and our request was declined.

Q *How does the voting process work regarding disaffiliation?*

A In the Arkansas Conference there are six votes required for churches choosing to complete the disaffiliation process:

- a. The local church's governing body (i.e., Church Council), adopts a motion to enter the discernment process related to the possible disaffiliation from the UMC by at least a simple majority vote in order to seek certification into the Discernment Process.
- b. At the third of three required Listening Sessions, a straw poll vote is taken to consider the question of asking the District Superintendent to call for a Church Conference vote on disaffiliation. All Professing Members of the local church who are present are eligible to vote. A simple majority is required to seek a Church Conference vote.

- c. If a Church Conference vote is requested following the outcome of the straw poll vote and it is set by the District Superintendent, then all Professing Members of the local church who are present are eligible to vote on the disaffiliation. A 2/3 majority of those present is required to pass the motion to disaffiliate.
- d. If a 2/3 majority vote is received, then the local church Board of Trustees is authorized to adopt a Standard Disaffiliation Agreement (SDA) as provided by the Annual Conference via a simple majority vote.
- e. If the SDA is approved by the local church Board of Trustees, it is subject to approval by the Annual Conference Board of Trustees by a simple majority vote.
- f. Finally, upon a recommendation of the Annual Conference Board of Trustees, the Standard Disaffiliation Agreement is subject to ratification by the Annual Conference in a regular or special session by a simple majority vote. (Special sessions of the Annual Conference have been set for November 19, 2022, and March 13, 2023, by Arkansas Bishop Mueller to consider churches who have voted to disaffiliate following the process outlined by the Arkansas Conference).

Q Who is eligible to vote in the straw poll and Church Conference at the local church?

A All Professing Members and appointed and retired clergy are eligible to vote. Simply attending Central UMC does not qualify a person as a Professing Member. Professing Members are persons who have been administered the vows of membership by the clergy of the local church. Professing Members may be removed from the rolls of the church by withdrawal of membership, transfer to another church, death, or by Charge Conference action. If you have any question about whether you are a Professing Member of the church, please contact the Director of Membership Services at the church office at 479-442-4237 or you may review an online alphabetical listing of Professing Members of the church that will be placed on the Discernment Process landing page in mid-November.

Q Who establishes the motions to be considered at the Straw Poll and Church Conference?

A The wording for the motions is provided by the Arkansas Conference UMC as approved by the Arkansas Conference legal team.

Q Are there other churches in Arkansas considering disaffiliation?

A As of October 25, slightly over 110 United Methodist churches in Arkansas have entered a Discernment Process related to possible disaffiliation from the UMC, while approximately 500 have opted to remain in the United Methodist Church. Approximately 25 churches have already approved disaffiliation by the required 2/3 majority vote with others pending in the months ahead. Just under ten churches that commenced the process have opted to withdraw from it. The deadline for churches that choose to complete the disaffiliation process is December 31, 2023.

Q *Is the debate in our denomination over human sexuality the cause of our schism?*

A Since the 1970s, there has been increasing levels of disagreement in the UMC over issues related to human sexuality. At each General Conference since 1972, there has been extensive debate regarding the appropriateness of language contained in the Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality. Some have characterized the language as harmful and advocated for it to be removed from the Book of Discipline. Some have suggested allowing individual churches and pastors to make their own determinations about how to manage matters of human sexuality. Others have advocated for maintaining the existing stances contained in the Book of Discipline. Proponents of disaffiliation from the UMC have cited other causes for our schism including theological differences and a lack of adherence to the Book of Discipline by some bishops and clergy. Proponents of staying in the UMC argue that reported incidents of not adhering to the Book of Discipline are isolated in nature and not reflective of the vast majority of clergy and bishops.

Q *What changes would we see at Central if we vote to disaffiliate?*

A Our pastors would no longer be under an appointment system but would instead be hired by the church. We would no longer use the Cross & Flame logo. Other noticeable changes would include, changing the name/logo on church vehicles, replacement of the monument sign on Dickson Street to reflect the new name of the church and replacement of the sanctuary hymnals.

Q *Do our pastors support disaffiliation?*

A According to the Arkansas Conference, the decision to disaffiliate is a decision for the laity of the church to make. Our five appointed pastors (Carness Vaughan, Steve Pulliam, Greg Gibson, Daniel Rupp and Jody Farrell) have all publicly stated that they support disaffiliation. In addition, both pastors Emeriti (Jack Wilson and Tony Holifield) support disaffiliation.

Q *If Central votes to disaffiliate what will happen to our pastors?*

A Pastors are permitted to make a choice separate and apart from the decision made by the local church. Pastors may decide to remain in the UMC and be offered an appointment at another church that opts to remain in the UMC. Pastors may opt to leave the UMC, in which case they can seek employment with the disaffiliating church or another church. Central's five current pastors have indicated their desire to become employed by the disaffiliating church if given the opportunity. As an independent church, Central would be able to hire whoever they choose to be their pastor(s), who would then be accountable to the congregation and not to a bishop.

Q *If Central disaffiliates, would we join another denomination?*

A No, at least not initially. Upon approval and ratification of a vote to disaffiliate, Central would become an independent congregation. The Senior Pastor and Church Council would then establish a plan and process for the church to study options for affiliating with another Wesleyan denomination, joining with a network of like-minded independent churches, or remaining an independent church for the long-term. Regardless, any decision on affiliating with another denomination would be subject to a vote of the church family and only done after a season of prayer and listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Q *If Central votes to disaffiliate would our church name change?*

A Yes. If Central disaffiliates from the United Methodist Church, the church would not be allowed to use the word “United” in the church name. A determination on the new name for the church would be managed by the Church Council in conjunction with the church family.

Q *If Central votes to disaffiliate what happens to our buildings, property, and other assets?*

A At present, Central UMC holds title to approximately \$42 million in properties. All church properties are subject to the trust clause of the United Methodist Church. The trust clause provides that if the property ceases to be used for United Methodist Church purposes that ownership of the property reverts to the Annual Conference. If a vote to disaffiliate from the UMC is approved and ratified by the Arkansas Annual Conference, the Standard Disaffiliation Agreement provides that the deeds of the local church will be revised to remove the trust clause so that the ownership of the property remains solely in the possession of the local church. Other cash and assets of the church would remain with the disaffiliating church. Endowment funds would also remain with the disaffiliating church if they were not otherwise dedicated in whole or in part to the UMC in the agreements establishing the endowments.

Q *If Central disaffiliates, how will it impact our mission partners locally and internationally?*

A Central’s leadership anticipates maintaining all existing local and international mission partners if funding exists to do so but would no longer have any official connection to United Methodist missions.

Q *What is the impact on Genesis Church if Central disaffiliates?*

A At present, Genesis Church operates as a second campus of Central. Genesis Church has in place an Advisory Board, Finance Committee, and Personnel Committee to help manage day-to-day governance. No change in the relationship with Genesis Church is anticipated, at least initially. Genesis Church has had some discussions of desiring to become an independent congregation among their leadership and it is anticipated that these discussions would continue regardless of the outcome of the vote on disaffiliation for Central.

Q *What is the impact on UA Wesley College Ministry if Central disaffiliates?*

A The property upon which the UA Wesley College Ministry sits is owned by Central UMC. The campus pastor for the UA Wesley College Ministry currently is appointed to Central and assigned to oversee the ministries of Wesley. UA Wesley has a separate Advisory Board and Finance Committee along with several other sub-committees to manage the governance of Wesley. Central provides a subsidy transfer to cover the full cost of the compensation and benefits of the UA Wesley campus pastor along with a financial subsidy and various means of operational support. The Arkansas Conference currently provides approximately \$73,000 of annual financial support which would no longer be available upon disaffiliation. No change is anticipated in Central’s relationship with Wesley. Future prospects for collaboration with the United Methodist Church in Arkansas may be explored but are unknown currently.

Q What is the cost of disaffiliation for Central?

A The cost to disaffiliate is provided by the Arkansas Annual Conference UMC. The latest information shared by the Arkansas Annual Conference is that liabilities owed to the Annual Conference would total \$1,091,704.54. This figure is subject to change in early 2023. Should Central's pastors choose to remain in the UMC, there would be an additional expense of up to \$374,226.28 to help cover their salaries and benefits. This would be reduced proportionally for each of Central's five clergy who choose not to remain in the UMC. There would also be some legal and filing fees estimated at \$2,500-\$5,000 associated with updating the deeds of the local church and the articles of incorporation and by-laws. Additional costs would involve replacement of the Dickson Street monument sign, replacement of sanctuary hymnals, and other miscellaneous updates estimated not to exceed \$20,000.

Q How would Central pay the cost of disaffiliation?

A Central does not have ample reserve funds on hand to cover the cost of disaffiliation. Therefore, funding would either have to be provided through a special giving focus and/or borrowing of the funds from a local bank.

Q If Central disaffiliates, would anything change with our budget?

A Yes. Approximately \$475,000 is paid annually (between the Dickson Street and Genesis Church campuses) to the Arkansas Conference in tithes (formerly known as apportionments), which have been used to help cover the cost of Arkansas Conference UMC ministries and other UMC ministries around the world. These obligations would no longer be required to be paid if Central disaffiliates and becomes an independent congregation. Additionally, it is predictable that a number of families who support the church financially may leave Central in order to stay in the UMC, while other families may opt to join with the new church.

Q How are the Conference tithes (formerly known as apportionments) utilized by the UMC?

A Central currently pays approximately 6% of the Arkansas Conference budget, which is the largest share paid by any church in Arkansas. The Conference tithe provides for clergy and retiree benefits, general denominational apportionments, jurisdictional apportionments, the district office budgets, conference administration, and resourcing conference ministries, which includes conference outdoor ministries and college campus ministries. The general church apportionments include support for Africa University, UMC seminaries, the Episcopal Fund which provides for compensation and benefits for all UMC churches, and World Service which includes UMC missions and agencies.

Q What is the impact if Central votes to remain in the UMC?

A Central would remain in connection to the United Methodist Church with pastors under appointment by the Arkansas Conference bishop. Governance would remain as outlined in the Book of Discipline. It is predictable that a number of families who support the church financially may leave Central, while other families may opt to join the church.

Q If Central is no longer a United Methodist Church, what will our beliefs be based upon?

A Central's beliefs – our doctrine and theology – will stay the same. As a disaffiliated church, Central would no longer be governed by the Book of Discipline. For many years, Central has listed our Statement of Beliefs on the church website, found at the following URL - <https://centraltolife.com/what-we-believe/>. They are in line with the Articles of Religion and the EUB Confession of Faith that serve as the foundation of Wesleyan theology. Central's pastors all affirm these beliefs and teach them. If Central eventually decides to become a part of another denomination, the beliefs of that denomination would also guide the local church's belief structure.

Q If Central votes to disaffiliate what happens to my membership in the UMC?

A If Central votes to disaffiliate, all members of the church will retain their membership in the United Methodist Church. Church lay members who wish to have their church membership in the newly disaffiliated congregation must indicate their desire to join the new church through methods established by the church. Those who do not indicate a desire to join the new church will remain United Methodist and be contacted by the Arkansas Conference UMC to determine the best options for handling their membership going forward. No more than 30 days following a vote to disaffiliate, Central would be required to furnish the Arkansas Conference a roll of all members who have not expressed an intent to remove their membership in the United Methodist Church.