

January 10, 2023

To: The Saints at Huntersville United Methodist Church

From: Paul B. Thompson (Senior Pastor)

Subject: The Future of the UMC and HUMC

I greet you in the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. I write to give you important information regarding the on-going conversation around proposed changes to our United Methodist Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality and LGBTQ+ inclusion in the life of the church, and the schism that is currently transpiring within the denomination regarding these proposed changes. In preparation for holy conversations to occur in the final weeks of January, we are offering you multiple resources to view and read (which you will find on our church's website), and then ask that you sign up for one of holy conversations listed below. I am going to convene groups of 10-12 people on the times and dates below. The conversations are designed to last for no more than an hour and will primarily be listening sessions in which you ask questions regarding what you have viewed and read and provide feedback as to how you wish for our church to proceed.

The dates and times are as follows:

January 22-9:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

January 24-7:00 p.m.

January 25-9:00 a.m.

January 26-7:00 p.m.

January 28-9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.

January 29-9:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

January 31-7:00 p.m.

Here is some vital information to begin the conversation:

- Paragraph 4 of the "Articles of Religion" (that date back to the beginnings of Methodism), that is core to our tradition states that "no unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition."
- Judicial Council decisions (our Supreme Court) has ruled that this includes gay, transexual, or any other status. Further, paragraph 214 rules that all may attend the UMC worship services and participate in all activities of the church regardless of their sexuality. We are intended to be an inclusive church.
- In 1972, a clause was added to the Book of Discipline (paragraph 304.3) that says "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church." Further, additional paragraphs have been added to the Book of Discipline in subsequent years, such as 341.6 that says, "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall

not be conducted in our churches.” Paragraph 613 forbids the General Conference finance Council from giving funds to groups that promote the acceptance of homosexuality, but also for them not to support groups that “reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends” (paragraph 161f).

So, in essence the church has affirmed the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the life of the church, although stating that the church does not condone the practice of homosexuality, and, drawing distinctions when it comes to licensing or ordaining gay clergy or having UM clergy perform same-sex marriages/unions. As many vehemently disagree with this stance, believing that homosexuality is not a sin, and should not disqualify someone from serving, a deep division has resulted.

As people of God, we believe God’s Word is formative on this and all issues. But many struggle to find clarity on this issue as they faithfully study the scriptures.

Here are some Biblical references we encourage you to study:

Leviticus 18:22	II Corinthians 5:19
Leviticus 20:13	I John 4:7-12
I Corinthians 6:9-11	Colossians 1:19-20
Romans 1:26-27	John 15:26
Jude 1:7	Revelation 7:9
I Timothy 1:10	Ephesians 6:5
Luke 17:21	Romans 2:1-5
Galatians 5:14	I John 3:18

A History

The first mention of the UM church’s stance on these issues began in 1972, only 4 years after the founding of the UM church. Statements were added in subsequent years (previously referenced). The issue has been hotly debated at every General Conference since. (General Conference is the only body that can speak for the denomination. Held every 4 years, delegates from all over the world convene to discuss and debate UM rules and practices). In 2016, as the debate became more contentious and the fracture over the church’s stance became more acute, different solutions were offered. In 2019, a special General Conference convened to “settle” the debate. Basically, the General Conference of 2019 only served to solidify the church’s current stance per the *Book of Discipline*, but highlighted the deep divisions caused by these statements which roughly half of the delegates disagreed. Groups were formed to study alternatives and possible solutions/remedies and bring proposals to the General Conference in the regularly scheduled General Conference for year 2020, to be held in Minneapolis, MN.

“Progressive” United Methodists advocated that the restrictive language prohibiting self-avowed, practicing homosexuals from serving as Pastors and same-sex ceremonies be officiated by our clergy be removed from the *Book of Discipline*, allowing for Pastors and congregations to decide for themselves how they will proceed with this issue.

“Conservative” United Methodists were not willing to abide with these changes. The showdown was coming at General Conference 2020.

Then, Covid happened. The 2020 General Conference was postponed, then postponed again, and again, finally resolving that the earliest possible meeting was 2024 (in Charlotte, NC).

In the meantime, a group of “conservative” United Methodists believed that the time was right for the denomination to split over these issues and for a relief from the constant turmoil and debate. A “Wesleyan Covenant Association” was formed that began making plans to create a new denomination for like-minded churches and clergy. In 2022, the “Global Methodist Church” was created from the Wesleyan Covenant Association, and some churches began the process of disaffiliating from the UM church in favor of this new denomination that promises in part to maintain the current church’s stance against the ordaining of gay clergy and prohibiting same-sex marriages being performed by the clergy, or within the church.

Some churches have decided to withdraw/disaffiliate from the UM church, but not join a denomination, becoming essentially independent churches. A “disaffiliation process” was included in the *Book of Discipline* (see the link to the paragraph 2553), and churches and Annual Conferences have been struggling with how to proceed.

There are two sticking points that remain:

- 1) The UM church has a trust clause that states that the building and property of a UM church belongs to the Annual Conference, not the church members. If a church withdraws from the denomination, they cannot take the property and building with them. These issues are currently being worked out, with legal procedures and other remedies being pursued.
- 2) The UM church has a pension system that has long supported UM clergy. It is built upon the on-going support of clergy and churches making contributions so that the system remains solvent and able to meet the obligations promised to retired clergy. Withdrawing from the UM church will have negative implications for the pension system. Churches are having to pay substantial sums of money to fulfill these obligations as they withdraw/disaffiliate from the church.

There are options for us as a United Methodist congregation:

- 1) Continue as a member congregation of the UMC. We do not need to vote. We don’t need to do anything except continue to “do all in our power to strengthen its ministries.” Assurances have been made by the Bishops that there will be room for UM churches under a “big tent” that will allow Pastors to decide for themselves what marriages they will officiate and for the Conference to continue to match the gifts and graces of congregations with Pastors who fit that profile. If a congregation is more traditional and desires a Pastor who matches that philosophy, they should receive that type of Pastor, and progressive churches would receive Pastors who match that understanding.
- 2) If enough feedback is received that we should pursue a different course, we would follow the provisions of the disaffiliation process (see link). It would require a 2/3 vote and would require a substantial amount to be paid to settle pension liabilities (in the \$500,000 range).
- 3) Wait for the 2024 General Conference where these issues will certainly be addressed with more clarity and definition. It is likely that provisions for easier disaffiliation will be considered. There is a growing perception that it is

time to move on, allowing those who want to leave an easier path, and for everyone to focus on once again being the church God calls us to be.

While there is no hurry for us to act, I think the time is right to have these important conversations. For us as a church to move forward as one, there needs to be a consensus built as to who we believe God is calling us to be. It is time to pray, to discuss, to discern what and who we shall be. I ask that you do spend time looking at the resources we offer before coming to the sessions. May we find the Spirit of God leading us in these important conversations.