

New Beginnings

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

New Beginnings UMC Family & Friends,

I wanted to share with you an important decision our Church Council made during our first meeting of 2023.

As you may have heard, some United Methodist Churches are electing to leave the denomination, primarily over debate related to matters of human sexuality.

First, you should know that, at present, and, at least until May of 2024, The United Methodist Church rules will not allow a United Methodist pastor to perform a same-gender wedding or an avowed, practicing homosexual person to be ordained.

The Book of Discipline states that “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers the practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” This has been the United Methodist position since 1972.

And, since 1972 there has been increasing concern that these rules are in conflict with other statements, also in our Book of Discipline, that profess all persons are of sacred worth and created in God’s image. The Discipline says that United Methodist Churches are to “live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian or gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons” (par. 161.G, page 113).

In recent years, some churches and pastors have chosen to disregard the prohibitions regarding weddings and ordination, while others have asked for greater penalties for those that do. For some, the disagreement has been frustrating and they have felt led to leave. For others, there has been a commitment to be part of a denomination that has room for differences of opinion on this matter while remaining united in their love for Jesus, their desire to follow him and to help others become disciples of Jesus.

In 2019, a pathway that made it easier to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church was adopted by the special called General Conference. For the first time in Methodist history, churches could buy their property from the denomination. Not anticipating a global pandemic would postpone the 2020 General Conference, a provision was included that would close the window to leave by the end of 2023. Also included was a fair amount of discretion to allow Annual Conference’s Boards of Trustees to establish requirements for their particular Conferences. The South Carolina Annual Conference has recently released a “Discernment Process” that churches wishing to separate from the denomination must enter. Technically speaking, they would close their church and transfer assets to a new church entity.

The process, which must be initiated by the Church Council, requires a minimum of 30 days of prayer and discernment, during which the church property must be commercially appraised and other financial obligations clarified, and informational meetings would be held for the congregation. After the 30 days, a Church Conference would be called and scheduled by the District Superintendent to announce the anticipated financial cost of leaving the denomination and any other findings of how that decision would affect the local church. Then a vote

would be cast, requiring two-thirds of members in good standing to vote in favor of closing as a United Methodist Church. All of this would need to be accomplished by March 1 of this year, and financial obligations in escrow as of March 31 to complete process for this year.

Learning all that is required to enter the process and that this process is available to the local churches any year as the 2023 sunset provision does not apply, our Church Council elected to not enter into the discernment process toward disaffiliation.

It was determined that it is premature to go through the process given both the time constraints, financial obligations, and lack of knowledge. There has been a lot of speculation about what will happen at the General Conference in 2024, but honestly, we simply do not know the outcome and how that will impact local churches. We won't know anything until May 2024. We also recognized that to accomplish all of this process before March of 2023 would mean essentially putting the rest of our ministry on pause between now and then. This would bring harm to a part of our congregation and would prevent us from fully investing our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness into effective and faithful ministry this congregation has long been known for.

You should know that the Council's recent vote does not preclude taking another at a different time. But the conversation must be initiated by Church Council. It does give us time to have conversations and come to see how Bible-believing, God and neighbor-loving followers of Jesus can reach different conclusions on what is faithful in these matters.

Our Council's decision to learn more before making monumental decisions related to our future as a United Methodist Church will also allow us to remain focused on our mission - making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We will continue to be a church that seeks to know, serve, and share Jesus Christ and that will receive the majority of our attention.

If you would like to learn more about the South Carolina Annual Conference's Discernment Process, visit <http://umcsc.org/discern>.

If you would like to stay informed of what is happening denominationally, including about matters related to what I have discussed today, I suggest the United Methodist News Service: <http://umnews.org>.

If you want to watch a series of videos Pastor Adam Hamilton shared about his perspective on the United Methodist Church and how he perceives some of the concerns that have been alleged against our denomination, visit <http://proudtobeumc.com>.

I am certainly proud to be a pastor of our church. New Beginnings United Methodist Church, you are faithful to love God and love neighbor. You continue to worship, grow, and serve. By God's grace, we will work toward accomplishing our mission together, knowing, growing in, and sharing Jesus our Lord; creating a safe and welcoming place for people to connect, belong, and experience the power of resurrection faith.

May God bless us as we commit to moving forward together in love and service that honors both God and neighbor.

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Christopher