**Pine Forest Church Disaffiliation Overview**

**A Refresher on Our Structure**

Pine Forest United Methodist Church is an example of the backbone of our denomination. The **local church** is where the spiritual rubber meets the proverbial road. Each local church is part of a **district** and the district is given oversight by a **District Superintendent**. Ours is the North Central District, and our superintendent is Rev. Craig Hutto. Each district is part of an **Annual Conference,** which is overseen by a bishop. Our conference is the South Georgia Annual Conference, and our bishop is David Graves, who is currently also over the Alabama/West Florida Conference. Annual Conferences are grouped together into **jurisdictions** with ours being the Southeastern Jurisdiction. The primary job of a jurisdiction is to elect bishops to provide leadership and oversight. All the jurisdictions from across the globe form what we call **General Conference.** If you think of annual conferences as states, the General Conference is like the federal government and our Book of Discipline is like our constitution. The General Conference, which is supposed to convene every four years, is the only body that can speak on behalf of the UMC and the only body that can change our theology and doctrine.

General Conference

Southeastern Jurisdiction

South Georgia Annual Conference

North Central District

Pine Forest UMC

**Where are we now?**

The Theology and Doctrine of The United Methodist Church is contained within our Book of Discipline (BOD). It is important to understand that human sexuality is not the true issue before us—it is simply the presenting symptom of a deeper theological malaise (more on this later). However, human sexuality and sexual ethics are where many eyes are focused. Our BOD states that a same-sex lifestyle is incompatible with Christian teaching, and this is based on how the Church has interpreted key texts around rightly-ordered sexual relationships for almost 2000 years. Consequently, annual conferences are not allowed to ordain people who practice a same-sex lifestyle, our churches are not allowed to host same-sex weddings, and our clergy are not allowed to officiate same-sex unions. This has been our rule of life on these issues since prior to the formation of the UMC in 1968. However, there have been efforts to change our doctrine and theology ranging from following proper voting procedures to open defiance for almost 50 years. Every time a vote has been brought to the floor of General Conference to change our theology, doctrine, and practice, the General Conference voted to uphold and adhere to historic Christian doctrine.

Once it finally became clear to our bishops that there is a deep, irreconcilable theological divide, a special General Conference was called for 2019 to bring a resolution to our conflict. Though many bishops and special agenda groups campaigned for an umbrella plan that would seek to have traditionalist, centrist, and progressive churches all under the name United Methodist, the General Conference voted to uphold traditional Christian doctrine around these issues. The vote was close. Even though historic theology and doctrine were affirmed, nothing changed. The open defiance of our agreed upon BOD continued. It became clear to many that the only way forward was a split. Traditionalists wanted it. Progressives wanted it. Centrists and institutionalists did not.

Not long after the 2019 General Conference, representatives of all three perspectives, including bishops, clergy, lay people, and special agenda group leaders met with a professional mediator and came up with a solution—The Protocol of Grace and Reconciliation Through Separation. Each represented group agreed that at General Conference 2020 they would put their full support and votes behind the Protocol. An actual way through the impasse finally seemed possible. A new, traditional, Wesleyan denomination would be formed and the post-separation UMC would be LGBTQ+ affirming. There would be a place for everyone, and every church would get to keep its assets and liabilities. Then COVID happened. GC 2020 was postponed. GC 2021 was postponed. And then in March 2022, GC 2022 was postponed until 2024. The first two made sense. The last one did not.

After the two-year postponement was announced, many churches and clergy reached their tipping point and began to utilize Paragraph 2553 of the BOD which outlines the process for a local church to disaffiliate from the denomination and leave with their property. Paragraph 2553 dissolves at the end of 2023. Our Conference Board of Trustees have absorbed the language of Paragraph 2553 into its disaffiliation policy, extending the deadline to the end of 2024.

Many hoped that an annual conference would be allowed to leave the denomination as a whole and either become its own entity or join the new traditional denomination that launched on May 1st—The Global Methodist Church. An inquiry was submitted to the Judicial Council—the UMC’s supreme court—to see if such a move was constitutional. The JC ruled that it was not. This was the final move that proved our denomination no longer works. Our episcopal leaders had every opportunity to find a resolution that avoided a decision having to be made at the local church level and they failed. Now each local church must decide where it stands and what its future with the UMC looks like. During Annual Conference, the news broke that the progressive and centrist authors of the Protocol were withdrawing their support, meaning that the Protocol is now dead and there appears to be no chance of a resolution. The voting data shows that at each General Conference the delegations will become more and more progressive in their theological commitments, and it seems likely that at GC 2024 our doctrine and theology will change to match the culture around us.

**Why don’t churches that either disagree with our current doctrine or disagree with where our denomination is headed just leave?**

There are several reasons, but the main one is called The Trust Clause. The Trust Clause was written by John Wesley and states that the property and assets of the local church are held “in trust” for the whole denomination. In short, no local UMC owns its own property. The church’s conference does. To leave means to abandon all property and assets. No traditional, centrist, or progressive congregation wants to do that. The irony is that John Wesley wrote the trust clause to ensure that only sound, Wesleyan, biblically orthodox preaching, and teaching would be heard in Methodist pulpits and sanctuaries. If a church or clergy began to preach contrary to the Bible, the clergy or congregation would be removed from the premises. Now, what was meant to protect biblical orthodoxy serves to keep biblically orthodox congregations linked to a denomination that is clearly headed away from orthodoxy.

**Why is now the time to have the conversation about our future with the UMC?**

Though our conference trustees have graciously extended the disaffiliation window to 2024, there is a shortage of trust throughout our denomination and Paragraph 2553 is a known commodity. It is clear that the denomination is heading away from biblical orthodoxy. Our doctrine and theology may be unchanged for now, but the ethics and practice of many with no accountability are a clear indicator of what is to come. The 2023 opportunity seems to be the last, guaranteed, denomination-wide opportunity for local churches to decide their own paths forward.

**You said sexuality is not the real issue, but that is all anyone talks about. What is the real issue?**

Scholar, Carl Trueman[[1]](#footnote-1), often states that the sexual revolution did not start itself. A greater revolution has been unfolding behind the scenes at an exponential pace—the revolution of how we understand the self. This revolution does not stretch the boundaries; it dissolves them. And as such, anything that seeks to define, limit, or control the self is thrown off and burned as a cumbersome, antiquated shackle. The Church and creedal, biblical faith are impacted by this revolution just as much as culture.

The true divide in our denomination is not over sexual ethics. It is a theological divide between competing commitments. There is profound disagreement on the nature of humanity, selfhood, self-determination, the authority of God through the Scriptures, the lordship of Jesus Christ over every believer, the necessity of the cross, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. There is no bridge that can span this gap. One shouts, “Express yourself!” The other beckons, “Deny yourself, Take up your cross, and follow me.”

How is this revolution showing up in our denomination? Here are some examples:

* Some advocate removing any preaching about the cross or Jesus dying for our sins because such language does harm to people[[2]](#endnote-1).
* Some advocate removing any language of confession because we might make someone feel guilty.
* Some advocate dropping “making disciples of Jesus Christ” from our mission statement and just focusing on the second half— “the transformation of the world.”
* The Illinois Great Rivers Conference has unanimously approved as a candidate for ordained ministry an openly gay man who performs as a drag queen named Ms. Penny Cost. He preaches in drag and prays to “God the mother.”[[3]](#endnote-2)
* A former Bishop is documented denying the eternal divinity, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Christ.[[4]](#endnote-3)
* The Florida Conference ordination debacle—an abuse of power.[[5]](#endnote-4)
* Karen Oliveto was elected bishop even though she is a practicing lesbian. Her election was ruled unconstitutional, but her jurisdiction left her in place.[[6]](#endnote-5)

There are other issues, but it should be noted that many feel our denomination no longer works. The inability of our leadership to maintain our doctrinal standards, the bloated, bureaucratic nature of our institution, the negative influence of numerous boards and agencies that do not uphold our doctrinal standards—all these things point to an ineffective structure for making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

**What does “disaffiliate” mean, and what is required?**

For the full list of requirements, please see the attached checklist. Disaffiliation is allowed through Paragraph 2553 of the BOD. It is the process by which a local church may leave the denomination and keep its property. The South Georgia Annual Conference keeps a bare minimum requirement for disaffiliation though other annual conferences make it highly punitive and complicated for their churches. Disaffiliation requires a specific timeline be followed.

Using June 2023 as an example:

* Church council/Board performs an inquiry of the congregation to assess if disaffiliation should be pursued. (Fall 2022)
* Church council/Board meets to vote on whether-or-not to consider disaffiliation.
* If the Council/Board votes to consider disaffiliation, it then notifies the DS of this desire (November/December 2022).
* DS holds an informal meeting at later date with Council/Board.
* The DS must convene a Church Conference within 120 days of being notified and no later than April 1st to vote on disaffiliation via a written ballot. Only members are allowed to vote. Approval requires 2/3 majority.
* Conference trustees approve and then annual conference approves.
* The disaffiliating church has 30 days to pay required fees for disaffiliation. The fees are the church’s unfunded pension liability (fluctuating number based on the market) and 12 months of apportionments.

**What options are in front of us?**

Pine Forest must make their choices independently. Our choice is not and should not be reliant on what other UM churches do or don’t do. Also, the choice must be made independent of who is serving as pastor. Our current bishop has repeatedly stated that his desire is to help each church end up where it wants to be. I believe him. But Jurisdictional Conference will be meeting this year to elect new bishops. Since Bishop Graves is currently serving two conferences, it is possible that we might lose him. The next bishop is an unknown factor.

1. If Pine Forest wants to remain in the UMC, then no action is required.
2. If Pine Forest wants to wait and see what happens at General Conference 2024 before deciding, then no action is required, though by then the window to disaffiliate might be gone.
3. If Pine Forest wants to disaffiliate at 2023’s Annual Conference, the church leadership must notify the DS in *early December 2022* of a desire to hold a Church Conference that would allow members to vote.
4. If Pine Forest wants to disaffiliate at **2024’s Annual Conference**, the church leadership must notify the DS in *early December 2023* of a desire to hold a Church Conference that would allow members to vote.
5. Note: There are pros and cons for both the 2023 and 2024 options.

**What’s options are in front of us if we vote to disaffiliate?**

It is tempting to jump to this question, but it is important to remember that the answer to this question should not determine how you answer the main question: Does our church need to stay in the UMC or not? That being said, there are several options in front of us:

1. Become an independent church.
2. Join an existing Wesleyan denomination—there are several.
3. Join the new traditional denomination—The Global Methodist Church.

There are pros and cons to each option.

**What is Pastor Brett going to do?**

Your decision should not be based on me.

Helpful links:

<https://www.sgaumc.org/disaffiliation>

<https://firebrandmag.com/articles/a-fight-for-the-faith-delivered-once-for-all>

<https://peopleneedjesus.net/>

<https://globalmethodist.org/>

1. See Truman, C. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://firebrandmag.com/articles/a-fight-for-the-faith-delivered-once-for-all [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. https://juicyecumenism.com/2021/03/12/the-umc-drag-queen-clergy-candidate/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. https://juicyecumenism.com/2017/05/19/methodist-bishops-false-doctrine/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. https://juicyecumenism.com/2022/06/14/disobedience-forced-unity-disrupt-umc-florida-conference/ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. https://juicyecumenism.com/2017/02/03/lesbian-bishop/ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)