

**ANSWERING
QUESTIONS**

about

**OUR
CURRENT
UNITED
METHODIST
SITUATION**



HUNTSVILLE FIRST
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Dear Huntsville First Family,

After decades of growing tension and diminishing trust, a division of the UMC is looming. Ironically, I am a United Methodist Christian because of a denominational division, and so I am sadly familiar with the feeling of not having a spiritual home. I was at a broken place when a UM church in Shelby County, Alabama needed a Youth Director in 1997. It matters that if the United Methodist Church that I chose -and which chose me- is going to experience a split, that it do so in such a manner that minimizes potential brokenness along the way.

This special booklet is a first step in that process. It is designed to be informative on an introductory level so that you might be prompted to learn more. Also, it is our prayer that this booklet would encourage us all to discern what God is calling Huntsville First to be for the coming seasons of our life together. This will be basic to some who've been reading everything on this topic for years. It may feel like a lot of information to those for whom news of a split is just that; news.

So, the goal is to communicate what is going on in the UMC in as evenhanded a manner as I am able. My aim is to raise the floor of our understanding of what's going on in the UMC. Building on this, we can have thoughtful and intentional times together to discern the best decision for this piece of God's body, the Church, here in Huntsville. Should a decision need to be made, my hope is that it will be thoughtful, healthy, and that we will continue to partner with God's grace to bring people to Jesus.

There are going to be plenty of nits to pick. I ask for your grace and that you give me the benefit of the doubt when I say I desire what is best for this church, regardless of what that means for me, personally.

I plan to follow up this booklet with a series of videos that can get a little deeper into these areas of information. Feel free to listen or view as much or as little as you find helpful. The schedule for these and in-person meetings may be found on the back cover. Then, as lay and clergy leadership map out the next steps, all will be well informed.

Grace and peace,

Byron Vance

The UMC is splitting?

Yes. There have been calls for separation for years, particularly regarding issues relating to LGBTQ marriage and ordination rites. There was hope in early 2020 of a separation that could be amicable. I believe it was the Holy Spirit who prompted Bishop John Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference to call together leaders at different ends of the theological spectrum for the purpose of reaching a healthy separation. *The Protocol for Grace and Reconciliation through Separation*, known simply as *The Protocol*, was the result of this call and much expert mediation. Traditionalist leaders sought to continue the church's prohibition on LGBTQ marriages and ordinations in the UMC. Progressive leaders sought to remove such prohibitions.

Many believe *The Protocol* had a real chance at a life-giving means of closure to bitter disagreements. However, just months after *The Protocol* was introduced, our world was changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The regular General Conference set for Spring 2020 was postponed to 2021, 2022, and in March of this year was postponed for the third time to 2024. With each postponement, the likelihood of its adoption appeared to lessen. Also in March, the developmental leaders of the Global Methodist Church, which was likely the resultant traditionalist denomination coming from legislation connected with *The Protocol*, announced that it would launch on May 1, 2022.

In the absence of what could have been this amicable process of separation, some churches have begun working with their leadership, District Superintendents, and Bishops to pursue other means of separation (disaffiliation) from, or to discern their next steps within the United Methodist Church.

The presenting issues may relate specifically to the question whether to extend marriage and ordination rites to LGBTQ followers of Jesus. However, as in most all relationships considering separation, there are other underlying issues. In this case, those deal with ways we interpret scripture, how we live into accountability, and a growing distrust of one another, to name just a few.





What does this have to do with Huntsville First?

Huntsville First is a theologically diverse church. We likely have people who have disagreed with one another for decades in the same Supper Clubs or Sunday School classes. Our worship services and mission trips likely range the theological divide. We have people with very strong convictions from very different approaches.

We also have a membership that cares deeply for the church. We need to know that some are ready to join the Global Methodist Church and some have no intention of not being United Methodist. Others are committed to God's work in this church, whatever name it might carry. Discerning together where we need to be is crucially important.

If separation is coming, does Huntsville First have options?

Absolutely, we do! The good news is that we are not without some measure of agency as it relates to our future. Possible paths for us are as follows:

- **Remain United Methodist** It is not assumed that departing the UMC is the best or preferred option for all churches.
- **Disaffiliate from the UMC** and:
 1. Join the Global Methodist Church
 2. Join a different evangelical denomination
 3. Become an independent church
 4. Disband (That's just not going to happen)
- **Wait for an outcome of the 2024 General Conference** General Conference is scheduled to take place in 2024. Legislation relating to these matters will certainly receive much attention. We could wait and reassess following this session.

What does a disaffiliation look like?

One of the pieces of legislation that was passed at the called General Conference of 2019 was *Paragraph 2553*. This allows a pathway for disaffiliation should the local church have theological conflicts or disagreements with the conference. This paragraph was designed with our current situation in mind. A churchwide vote at a called Church Conference would decide this departure.

In the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, *Paragraph 2553* is the only process by which churches are disaffiliating at this time.

Here are three things to consider in following this path:

1. The local church would retain its physical property
2. There is a cost. I believe as written it asks for two years of connectional giving (apportionments) and our church's portion of unpaid clergy pensions (the DS can acquire these figures).
3. There is a time parameter for using *Paragraph 2553*. I assume this is the case because the Called General Conference in 2019 would have been followed by regular sessions in 2020 and 2024. Therefore, the legislation has a time parameter that ends on December 31, 2023.

Who votes?

Some decisions in the local church can only be made at a Church Conference. The decision on whether to disaffiliate is one of these decisions. There would be a called Church Conference at which all professing members of Huntsville First would be eligible to vote. You must be present in order to vote.

When would the vote take place?

It would take place after a discernment period initiated with our District Superintendent, The Reverend Tom Parrish. If in response to an Annual Conference action, a vote from us might follow closely behind. If a vote is needed after the 2024 General Conference, then I would think it would take place in late 2024 or early 2025.





If a vote is necessary, what is the process?

1. First, we pray, (though we are hopefully doing this already).
2. Second, we inform the congregation and have opportunity for substantive conversation. We hope to do this regardless of any church vote.
3. Third, we invite all persons who are professing members of the church. Currently, this number is over 3,400.
4. Fourth, we give enough notice that each person has been adequately notified in order to ensure a healthy process.

Are there additional considerations?

Yes. It is also important that we define our wins. I see this as more than a decision concerning our denomination; it also involves a second decision regarding how we move ahead.

At the very beginning of this booklet, I shared that I was a casualty of a denominational divide myself. My heart has broken for much over our current divide, but I have particularly felt broken for those who may find themselves feeling spiritually homeless after any decision a church makes. So, if a decision is to be made whether to stay or go, I urge that we make a second decision to implement it in such a way that God can create His good out of it for all of us. It is a choice which involves not just where we will be, but how we choose to do so with consideration for all persons in our congregation.

What happens next?

Keep this resource handy and then check out the informational videos and other postings of this information in the days and weeks to come. Hopefully these will help you understand more of where we are and how we might move ahead together. Have loving conversations with others in the congregation, especially those whose perspective may be *different* from your own. Then, actively participate. Your questions are welcome, your voice valued, and with God's help we can begin to navigate the future of Huntsville First together.

If after having received this, you find that you would like to clarify your membership status, please send an email to jennifer@huntsvillefirst.org. Should you be interested in giving feedback via a short survey, please visit huntsvillefirst.org/mresponse.



LOOKING AHEAD

Videos:

- May 31
- June 6
- June 13

In-person Meetings:

- June 26 | 3pm | Sanctuary
- June 30 | 6pm | Wesley Worship Center