

From Your Bishop: ARE UNITED METHODISTS GOING TO DIVIDE?

Recently in a small group, I was asked, "Are United Methodists going to divide?" They had read something on social media that prompted the question and were concerned about the church they loved. The church where they were baptized, experienced Jesus, started in Sunday School, began to pray, learned the scriptures, celebrated communion, sang the hymns, were confirmed in Christ, joined the youth group, attended church camp, began to serve others, started to tithe, met their soul mate, exchanged their vows, buried their parents, and found support in grief.



Of course, their church had some challenging times and disagreements along the way. Occasionally, several families or some choir members got upset and left for what may have been good reasons. Most of them relied on each other and formed connections. None of them were perfect and their church was not either. It was a holy place where they encountered Christ, confessed their sin, found forgiveness, hope and direction. No wonder they were worried that the church – the people they love – might divide.

When Good News and the Wesleyan Covenant Association, two related caucuses, announced in March the start of a new denomination called the Global Methodist Church, people were surprised and concerned. Most people expected a General Conference would discuss this matter in a democratic assembly of our worldwide church. However, these caucuses discredited the decision by duly elected delegates to postpone General Conference and decided to separate. Will my pastor or my church leave The United Methodist Church? Will I have to choose another congregation? What happens to the church building, the legacy gifts, the memorials, the cemetery? What happens to my pension funds? As you can see, things can be complicated. What are the answers to these questions? Only God knows. That is if God spends time on power and politics in the church.

In my almost 22 years of being a bishop, I have had many churches close and more than a few that have left The United Methodist Church to become independent. Fortunately, in our Discipline, we have a clear process for both a pastor who wants to leave and a church that wants to leave. In each case, we begin with sharing our faith journey, celebrating our ministry, appreciating those who have built a foundation for us, and reviewing the reasons for separation.

A pastor who wants to leave surrenders their ordination credentials or license. We do not permit a pastor to hold credentials in two denominations simultaneously. The pension funds that have accrued will be vested, and the pastor is free to seek other employment. It is always helpful for the pastor to meet with the bishop or district superintendent to share their change of call, celebrate their service, and pray for their transition from our covenant community.

From Your Bishop: Are United Methodists going to divide?(Continued)

Although individual members may ask to be removed from membership of a local church at any time, a congregation must have an open conversation to ensure such a crucial decision is not driven by the pastor, a vocal minority, or even persons outside the church. Our Discipline has served us well over the years to honor the intent of donors who did not want their gifts misused and protect a church from authoritarian leaders who did not respect our democratic values of decision-making.

Therefore, a congregation that wants to separate will need to:

- Engage in a congregational discernment process and fully understand the responsibilities of separation prior to any church conference to make an official decision.
- Work with the Conference Trustees to meet obligations for apportionment payments, property, pension liabilities, and similar requirements.
- Vote by a 2/3 majority of the professing members present at a duly called church conference to separate and assume the agreed-upon responsibilities.
- Wait until the request for separation is approved at an Annual Conference session.

As you can see, a pastor can leave quickly, but it takes time for a local church. Since our conference has been meeting regularly for almost 183 years and many of our churches are over one hundred years old, we need to honor their heritage by taking time for information and discernment. At the same time, our heritage has respected democratic decision-making in official church conferences.

I will regret having any pastor or church leave our conference. Our evangelism and mission will be diminished. We will be less inclusive and diverse. I am also concerned that a pastor may not find another church and a church that leaves may have difficulty calling a pastor. Most importantly, I am concerned that any separation will not reflect the heart and way of Jesus for us to grow in holiness.

On my desk, I have an 1832 edition of "The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church." The opening page gives a brief account of the rise of Methodism, both in Europe and America, using words from John and Charles Wesley: "In 1729, two young men, in England, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness: followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1727, they saw likewise, that men are justified before they are sanctified: but still, holiness was their object. God then thrust them out to raise a holy people."

The United Methodist Church introduced me to Jesus Christ, who called me to holiness—personal and social. I have vowed to uphold our church with my prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. The question of whether United Methodists are going to divide is too important to leave to any caucus group or conversation on social media. It is an individual decision each of us must make.