



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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April 18, 2022

A Notable Development on the Future of The United Methodist Church

Dear Virginia Annual Conference:

I hope everyone had a blessed and joyous Easter! Throughout this year may you know the spirit and power of renewal and hope that comes from celebrating the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

The United Methodist Church has wrestled with matters related to human sexuality since 1972. With the most recent postponement of General Conference until 2024, and the launching of the Global Methodist Church, I wanted to share the following.

While the Cabinet and I believe the vast majority of churches in the Virginia Annual Conference will want to stay as part of The United Methodist Church denomination, there is a process for those that wish to leave and have prayerfully discerned this as their best course.

The Virginia Conference is also committed to dialogue with churches unsure about the path they should take. For many, remaining in this denomination will be the right decision. At all times, though, we will respect that the decision to stay or leave the denomination is one of conscience.

For those churches which are considering disaffiliating from the denomination over matters related to human sexuality, Paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline will be used to govern this process. After prayerful reflection and discussion, this is the recommendation of the Board of Trustees and the Cabinet. I agree with the recommendation.

Paragraph 2553 (¶ 2553), the full text of which follows, was adopted during the 2019 Special General Conference. Following close and expected scrutiny, in 2019 the Judicial Council upheld ¶ 2553 as consistent with the denomination's constitution.

The Council of Bishops has also recommended ¶ 2553 for such disaffiliations. As ¶ 2553 was adopted specifically to address "Disaffiliation of Local Churches Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality," it is clearly the most appropriate provision for these circumstances.

In conjunction with ¶ 2553, and as the first steps to a possible disaffiliation, churches should contact their District Superintendent to schedule an information meeting and spend 30 days in a prayerful discernment process for the congregation to be in alignment with God's purpose for the church. The results should be communicated to your District Superintendent.

Under ¶ 2553, a two-thirds vote of professing members present at a Called Church Conference is required to disaffiliate. Once legal matters relating to financial matters including the transfer of all property, real and personal, tangible and intangible are completed, the Annual Conference must ratify the disaffiliation. We anticipate periodic called Annual Conferences for these ratifications. The framework for addressing financial, property, and other

matters is discussed in ¶ 2553.

Please know I will continue to provide related updates. Thank you for your attention to these important matters.

Peace and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sharma D. Lewis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis

Paragraph 2553/¶ 2553, Page 776 of the Book of Discipline

[This paragraph became effective at the close of the 2019 General Conference.]

Section VIII. Disaffiliation of Local Churches Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality ¶ 2553. Disaffiliation of a Local Church Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality—1. Basis—Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.

2. Time Limits—The choice by a local church to disaffiliate with The United Methodist Church under this paragraph shall be made in sufficient time for the process for exiting the denomination to be complete prior to December 31, 2023. The provisions of ¶ 2553 expire on December 31, 2023 and shall not be used after that date.

3. Decision Making Process—The church conference shall be conducted in accordance with ¶ 248 and shall be held within one hundred twenty (120) days after the district superintendent calls for the church conference. In addition to the provisions of ¶ 246.8, special attention shall be made to give broad notice to the full professing membership of the local church regarding the time and place of a church conference called for this purpose and to use all means necessary, including electronic communication where possible, to communicate. The decision to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference.

4. Process Following Decision to Disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church—If the church conference votes to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church, the terms and conditions for that disaffiliation shall be established by the board of trustees of the applicable annual conference, with the advice of the cabinet, the annual conference treasurer, the annual conference benefits officer, the director of connectional ministries, and the annual conference chancellor. The terms and conditions, including the effective date of disaffiliation, shall be memorialized in a binding Disaffiliation Agreement between the annual conference and the trustees of the local church, acting on behalf of the members. That agreement must be consistent with the following provisions:

a) Standard Terms of the Disaffiliation Agreement. The General Council on Finance and Administration shall develop a standard form for Disaffiliation Agreements under this paragraph to protect The United Methodist Church as set forth in ¶ 807.9. The agreement shall include a recognition of the validity and applicability of ¶ 2501, notwithstanding the release of property therefrom. Annual conferences may develop additional standard terms that are not inconsistent with the standard form of this paragraph.

b) Apportionments. The local church shall pay any unpaid apportionments for the 12 months prior to disaffiliation, as well as an additional 12 months of apportionments.

c) Property. A disaffiliating local church shall have the right to retain its real and personal, tangible and intangible property. All transfers of property shall be made prior to disaffiliation. All costs for transfer of title or other legal work shall be borne by the disaffiliating local church.

d) Pension Liabilities. The local church shall contribute withdrawal liability in an amount equal to its pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference. The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits shall determine the aggregate funding obligations of the annual conference using market factors similar to a commercial annuity provider, from which the annual conference will determine the local

church's share.

e) Other Liabilities. The local church shall satisfy all other debts, loans, and liabilities, or assign and transfer them to its new entity, prior to disaffiliation.

f) Payment Terms. Payment shall occur prior to the effective date of departure.

g) Disaffiliating Churches Continuing as Plan Sponsors of the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits Plans. The United Methodist Church believes that a local church disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 shall continue to share common religious bonds and convictions with The United Methodist Church based on shared Wesleyan theology and tradition and Methodist roots, unless the local church expressly resolves to the contrary. As such, a local church disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 shall continue to be eligible to sponsor voluntary employee benefit plans through the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits under ¶ 1504.2, subject to the applicable terms and conditions of the plans.

h) Once the disaffiliating local church has reimbursed the applicable annual conference for all funds due under the agreement, and provided that there are no other outstanding liabilities or claims against The United Methodist Church as a result of the disaffiliation, in consideration of the provisions of this paragraph, the applicable annual conference shall release any claims that it may have under ¶ 2501 and other paragraphs of The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church commonly referred to as the trust clause, or under the agreement.