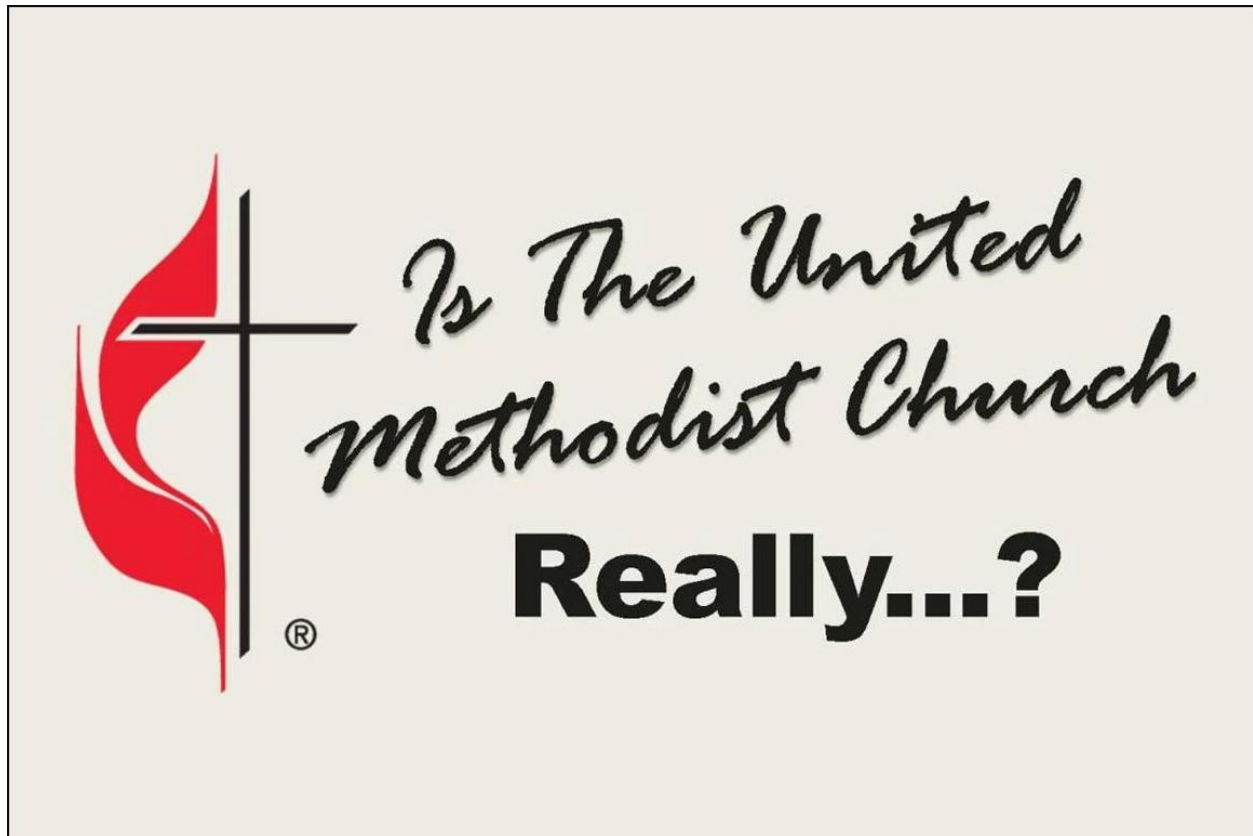


## Is The United Methodist Church Really...? (Part 1)



At Ask The UMC, we have been answering an increasing number of questions from congregations wondering about the future of The United Methodist Church and whether they should consider disaffiliating from it. Among these have been some recurrent questions that reflect misperceptions or misinformation that some congregations are receiving as they are discerning their next steps.

This is the first of a series of articles we will present to offer accurate responses to such misperceptions or misinformation. This article focuses on matters relating to theology, pensions, and benefits. The next article in the series will focus on matters relating to human sexuality.

We welcome your questions, and invite you to contribute to future articles in this series by sharing what you are hearing about the process of disaffiliation or the future of The United Methodist Church. Write to [AskTheUMC@umc.org](mailto:AskTheUMC@umc.org).

### *Is The UMC really...*

#### **1. Splitting at this time?**

No. The term “split” applies when there is a negotiated agreement within the denomination to divide assets and resources. No such agreement has been made in The United Methodist Church. The earliest point at which such an agreement could be made would be at the next General Conference to be held in 2024.

A more accurate term, as suggested by the Rev. William Lawrence, retired dean of Perkins School of Theology and former member of the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church, is “[splintering](#).” What is happening is that some traditionalist leaders have decided to create their own denomination (the Global Methodist Church). Leaders of that denomination and other unofficial advocacy groups, such as the [Wesleyan Covenant Association](#), which created it, are encouraging like-minded United Methodist congregations and clergy to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church and join their denomination instead.

## **2. Asking traditionalists to leave the denomination?**

No. The requests for disaffiliations are coming largely from traditionalists. Keith Boyette, former president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and now leader of the Global Methodist Church, describes the reasons he and other leaders are asking traditionalists to leave [beginning at 13:32 in this video](#).

### **Have questions? We have answers!**

Ask your questions and check out more FAQs.

[ASK FAQs](#)

## **3. About to alter its doctrine to deny the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus Christ or salvation through Christ alone?**

No. All of these positions are bedrock in the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church, more specifically in the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. These cannot be altered without a two-thirds vote of the General Conference followed by a three-fourths aggregate approval of all annual conferences of The United Methodist Church worldwide. There is no basis to conclude such majorities can be achieved to alter the Articles and Confession for any reason.

Here is what the Articles and Confession say on these matters. And will continue to say.

### *Virgin Birth and Divinity of Jesus*

Articles of Religion, Article II:

“The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man’s nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin.”

Confession of Faith, Article II:

“We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, in whom the divine and human natures are perfectly and inseparably united. He is the eternal Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

### *Salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ*

Articles of Religion, Article IX:

“We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith.”

Confession of Faith, Article IX:

“We believe we are never accounted righteous before God through our works or merit, but that penitent sinners are justified or accounted righteous before God only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

#### **4. Intending to change the Bible?**

No. The United Methodist Church has no official translation of the Bible and has never sought to alter the Bible at all. United Methodists have always had a variety of views about how to interpret specific passages of Scripture and likely always will.

#### **5. Allowing congregations that exit the denomination to continue to offer the same pension and health benefits programs to their clergy and staff?**

No. The Book of Discipline does not permit non-UMC entities to be plan sponsors of the Clergy Retirement Security Program. Only a General Conference can change this. Churches that disaffiliate will face changes to the benefits they can offer their clergy. Individual congregations and clergy that join the Global Methodist Church (GMC) will be eligible to participate in a retirement plan offered by the GMC, which will be a Wespath defined-contribution retirement plan similar to a United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (UMPIP).

Elders and deacons who withdraw under Discipline ¶1360 will have all assets accrued in CRSP and previous programs in which they may have participated (defined benefit and defined contribution) converted into a cash equivalent and placed into their United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (UMPIP). Future retirement plan contributions may be made to the new retirement plan described above which, like UMPIP, is a personal retirement account subject to the effects of the stock market and other investments on its value.

Nor, at this time, is it possible for *individual congregations* (whether in the Global Methodist Church or in the UMC) to be plan sponsors for the HealthFlex health insurance programs Wespath offers unless a congregation has more than 50 eligible employees. United Methodist annual conferences are the plan sponsors for congregations with fewer than 50 eligible employees. This means individual congregations with fewer than 50 eligible employees currently participating in these programs that exit The United Methodist Church at this time can no longer offer these benefits to their clergy and employees effective with the date of disaffiliation. Clergy currently covered by HealthFlex, whether they disaffiliate or not, are eligible to continue on the health insurance plan by paying 100% of the costs themselves for up to 18 months. At that point, the HealthFlex plan is no longer available to them. Individual congregations and clergy who join the Global Methodist Church may participate in the health benefits selected by the Global Methodist Church, which may include HealthFlex.

At Ask The UMC, we have been answering an increasing number of questions from congregations wondering about the future of The United Methodist Church and whether they should consider disaffiliating from it. Among these have been some recurrent questions that reflect misperceptions or misinformation that some congregations are receiving as they are discerning their next steps.

This is the second of a series of articles we will present to offer accurate responses to such misperceptions or misinformation. This article focuses on matters relating to human sexuality. The [first article](#) in this series focuses on matters relating to theology and pensions.

We welcome your questions, and invite you to contribute to future articles in this series by sharing what you are hearing about the process of disaffiliation or the future of The United Methodist Church. Write

to [AskTheUMC@umc.org](mailto:AskTheUMC@umc.org).

***Is The UMC really...?***

**6. Immediately dropping all prohibitions related to human sexuality, now that the Global Methodist Church has been officially started?**

No. The creation of the Global Methodist Church has no bearing on the existing policies of The United Methodist Church. The policies of The United Methodist Church are set by its General Conference. The General Conference is the only body that can change them. The General Conference is scheduled to meet next in 2024 at a time and venue to be announced.

**7. Going to drop all prohibitions related to human sexuality at its next General Conference in 2024?**

Probably not. The 2024 General Conference will certainly *consider* legislative proposals that would drop several existing prohibitions. There are items that could authorize clergy who choose to do so to preside at same-sex weddings or union ceremonies. There are several proposals to drop the statement “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” Some proposals would remove the current policy that forbids committees and boards of ordained ministry and clergy sessions to approve and bishops to license, commission, ordain, or appoint self-avowed, practicing homosexuals as clergy. Another would drop the prohibition on annual conferences and general agencies to provide any funding for any activity or publication that promotes “the acceptance of homosexuality.”

The key words are *consider* and *proposal*. The General Conference must *consider* all legislative items it receives. All legislative items before a General Conference are *proposals* only. They have no force unless a General Conference approves them.

All of these kinds of proposals have come before General Conferences in the past. And all have been defeated, every time.

At present, there do not appear to be enough shifts in the makeup of the delegations to the General Conference in 2024 to conclude that any of these proposals will pass.

**8. Going to require its clergy and clergy candidates to agree to offer same-sex weddings as a condition of candidacy, status, or appointment?**

No. There are no proposals before the next General Conference to do so, nor have there ever been such proposals.

As noted above, proposals to permit clergy who choose to do so to preside at such ceremonies have come before previous General Conferences and will come before the 2024 General Conference. All such proposals have been defeated in the past. And there is no basis, considering the makeup of the delegations, to conclude this will change in 2024.

**9. Ordaining drag queens and supporting worship of a “Queer God?”**

No and no.

Both of these allegations are based on things that actually happened. But both of those things have been seriously misrepresented.

No United Methodist bishop has ever ordained, commissioned, or licensed a drag queen.

So what is that allegation based on?

The Vermillion River District of The Illinois Great Rivers Conference voted unanimously [to approve the certification](#) of Mr. Isaac Simmons as a candidate for ordained ministry in 2021. The Book of Discipline prohibits “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals” from being certified as candidates for ordination. Mr. Simmons identifies as a gay man, but not as a practicing homosexual. He also performs under the drag name, Penny Cost, for the purposes of evangelism in audiences made up of people of many sexual and gender identities. Nothing in the Book of Discipline disqualifies persons who are gay but not practicing or who perform in drag from consideration or certification as a candidate.

The vote by a district committee to certify a candidate is one of the earliest steps in a process toward ordination. The process typically takes 5-8 years to complete.

Being approved by a district committee for candidacy is not being named clergy in The United Methodist Church. That can occur only after substantial work toward the completion of seminary educational requirements, ongoing supervision over a period of years, and ultimately approval for commissioning by a 3/4 vote of the clergy session of the annual conference. Until that time, if assigned by a district superintendent to serve a local church, candidates cannot preside at sacraments or at weddings.

The reference to supporting the worship of “Queer God” comes from a chapel service at Duke Divinity School sponsored by an LGBTQ+ student group. Duke Divinity School serves students of many denominations, not just United Methodists. And students of many denominations make up the LGBTQ group that sponsored the service in question, as that service has been described [in some publications](#). Exactly one of the students named is identified as United Methodist, and that student is, at this point, a candidate, not yet clergy in The UMC. Further, such “group sponsored” services represent the views of their sponsoring organization, not the Divinity School, nor its faculty. Such services are not a basis for making any statements about the beliefs or views of The United Methodist Church. General Conference establishes the official statements of The United Methodist Church and its ritual. Chapel services in a seminary do not.

#### **10. Ignoring or refusing to implement the Discipline's statements, restrictions, and requirements regarding practicing homosexuals and same sex weddings?**

In the majority of conferences, no. In some conferences, it may appear so. In those placing these matters "in abeyance," also no.

#### *Ignoring the Discipline?*

The bishops of the Western Jurisdiction have [publicly stated](#) that they will not "withhold or challenge ordination based on a candidate's gender identity or sexual orientation."

The Discipline nowhere states that gender identity or sexual orientation is a basis for withholding or challenging ordination. The Discipline does prohibit district committees on ordination from certifying as candidates and bishops from licensing, commissioning, ordaining, or appointing as clergy persons who are "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals." Stating one is homosexual is not disqualifying. What is disqualifying is being or being proven to a jury of peers in a church trial to be a self-avowed, practicing homosexual. So this statement of the Western Jurisdiction bishops does not ignore the Discipline.

The statement by the bishops of the Western Jurisdiction also says, "We are unwilling to punish clergy who celebrate the marriage of two adults of any gender or sexual orientation seeking the blessing of God and the Church for their covenanted life together." Bishops do not apply "punishments" as part of the complaint process. Rather, bishops oversee the process to its conclusion. If a church trial is necessary, bishops preside at the church trial. If guilt is found in a church trial, it is not the bishop who imposes a "sentence." It is the jury of peers who both reach a verdict and set a sentence. The Discipline names a mandatory minimum sentence the jury must apply to those found guilty of having conducted a same-sex marriage or union ceremony: one year suspension without pay. No other offense has a mandatory minimum sentence. See ¶12711.3 of the [2019 revision](#) to the Book of Discipline. Since bishops do not "punish" in the complaint process, this statement does not ignore the requirements of the Discipline. Instead, it expresses the intent of the bishops not to be punitive.

The [district superintendents in the Iowa Conference](#) have announced they will "grant contextual permission" for clergy of the conference to preside at same-sex weddings in Iowa effective in January 2022.

Examples such as this, in which some provisions of the current Discipline may be over-ridden through contextual permission by a district superintendent, are a rare exception. No other conference has stated this kind of policy to date.

#### *Abeyance: Refusing to Implement the Discipline?*

While there are few examples that come close to "ignoring the Discipline," a number of bishops and some cabinets have indicated their commitment, in the words of the [Minnesota Conference extended cabinet](#), to hold in abeyance all... administrative and judicial complaint processes addressing restrictions in the *Book of Discipline* regarding gay and lesbian clergy and/or same-sex weddings until after General Conference meets and action related to the separation of the denomination can be considered."

What is abeyance, and where did this idea come from?

The term "abeyance" means "delay." It does not mean a refusal to implement the Discipline. It means delaying further action on certain kinds of charges for a limited period of time and for particular reasons. Bishops who have announced they are placing such charges in abeyance are not refusing to implement the Discipline. They are indicating they *will* process such charges in light of actions that take place at a later time.

This approach to dealing with such charges began with the development of the so-called [Protocol legislation](#), announced in January 2020.

While the Protocol legislation has no effect unless or until a General Conference approves it, the process of developing it included [a commitment by all of its signers](#), including key leaders of traditionalist organizations and eight United Methodist bishops from across the connection. Article V of the agreement states, "As one expression of reconciliation and grace through separation, the undersigned agree that all administrative or judicial processes addressing restrictions in the *Book of Discipline* related to self-avowed practicing homosexuals or same-sex weddings shall be held in abeyance beginning January 1, 2020 through the adjournment of the first conference of the post-separation United Methodist Church. Clergy shall continue to remain in good standing while such complaints are held in abeyance."

The term "post-separation United Methodist Church" referred originally to the General Conference in 2024, assuming the General Conference meeting in 2020 would have passed the Protocol or other terms of separating the denomination. Since the 2020 General Conference is now delayed to 2024, the first post-separation General Conference would be in 2028. And the term separation involves an action of the General Conference. It does not apply to the decision of the Wesleyan Covenant Association to launch the Global Methodist Church prior to the next General Conference.

The part of the Protocol [agreement](#) calling for abeyance for some period of time, originally signed by eight bishops, has since also been committed to by several other bishops in the United States. Signers of this statement also included Keith Boyette, formerly leader of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and currently leader of the Global Methodist Church. Boyette has separately [stated his agreement](#) with a practice of abeyance on such charges until a General Conference can meet to decide next steps.

To those on all "sides" who indicated their support for abeyance effective in 2020, abeyance in processing such charges was not seen as a refusal to implement the Discipline. Rather, it represented and represents the hope for a less stressful time of separation leading up to and following the action of a General Conference to create such a separation.

What can we accurately say about the isolated examples noted and the wider practice of abeyance? The Discipline's statements, restrictions, and requirements regarding self-avowed, practicing clergy and same-sex marriages are unevenly enforced in The United Methodist Church at this time. Initiatives by individual conferences or jurisdictions are one source of this unevenness. The practice of abeyance derives from a mutual agreement of United Methodists who identify as progressive, centrist, and traditionalist. Still, the provisions of the Discipline remain in force and are more widely more enforced across the whole denomination, worldwide, than not.

*This content was produced by Ask The UMC, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.*