

Discernment Process

Since last May our church has been in discussion about the process of disaffiliation. We are now in a 75-day period of discernment that will end on September 19th. During this period, we are focusing on prayer and fasting to seek further guidance from the Lord in these important decisions.

Following the second Town Hall Meeting on August 31, we will begin seeking feedback from our membership regarding decisions to assess whether our Council requests a Church Conference wherein a vote would be taken. The deadline for this is now October 15th. Paragraph 2553 regarding disaffiliation expires December 31st this year. Paragraph 2553 was created in the 2019 General Conference which allowed churches the ability to disaffiliate by meeting certain criteria. There was greater clarification of this process added by our Conference Trustees in June. We are currently working on this process now.

Structure of the United Methodist Church

We have borrowed the following information to give a synopsis of the UMC Structure. It is our hope this will be helpful as we move through the process of discernment.

The UMC is organized in a very similar fashion to the US Government, with executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and an overarching document, the Book of Discipline, serving as a constitution.

The UMC's executive branch consists of the episcopacy, or the bishops. A UMC bishop is a clergy person that is elected by their jurisdiction or central conference to serve a region for a four-year term; they are responsible for the spiritual and administrative leadership of their assigned region, or Annual Conference (more on this later). Any new bishop may not be assigned to the area from which they were elected for at least four years following their election; however, this restriction may be ignored if a two-thirds vote is received from both the jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy and the Jurisdictional Conference.

The UMC's legislative branch is made up of Conferences. Starting at the worldwide scale, the General Conference is the primary lawmaking body of the entire UMC following each General Conference, a revised Book of Discipline is published to reflect the legislation passed.

Moving towards the smaller conferences, the Jurisdictional Conference consist of multiple US-state regions and are responsible for the appointment of new Bishops and the selection of members for general boards and agencies. The Annual Conference is the most basic unit of legislation; it is at these annual meetings where clergy members are officially assigned to congregations, reports are given on past and ongoing work, legislation pertaining to the local churches of the region and the work of the Church is discussed/adopted, clergy are ordained as deacons/elders, and (every 4 years) delegates to the General and Jurisdictional Conferences are elected. Outside of the US, Annual Conferences are referred to as Central Conferences.

Finally, the UMC's judicial branch is the Judicial Council. It is the highest judicial body of the Church and determines the constitutionality of acts/proposed acts of the Conferences according to the Book of Discipline. It consists of 9 members, which are elected by the General Conference.

From Global to Local – Let's further examine the legislative branch of the UMC, which is where most of the confusion over the structure of the Church arises.

General Conference. When you think of the UMC as a global church, this gathering is usually what comes to mind as the best representation of the global nature of the Church. Every 4 years, delegates from all over the world come together for nearly 2 weeks to set official policy and speak for the entire Church. Half of the delegation is made up of lay people, and the other half is made up of clergy members.

Jurisdictional Conference. In the US, the UMC divides the country into 5 regions, or jurisdictions. The 5 jurisdictions are the Northeastern Jurisdiction, the Southeastern Jurisdiction, the North Central Jurisdiction, the South Central Jurisdiction, and the Western Jurisdiction. Each jurisdiction contains anywhere from 8 to 15 Annual Conference regions. We are located in the Southeastern Jurisdiction.

Annual Conference. The term “Annual Conference” refers to one of three things: “a regional body, an organizational unit, and a yearly meeting” (UMC.org). As a regional body, an Annual Conference can encompass anywhere from part of a US state to more than one state. As an organizational unit, the Annual Conference is made up of staff that oversee and work in different ministries and committees of the Annual Conference. In total, the US has 54 Annual Conferences. We are located in the Alabama West-Florida Annual Conference in the Southeastern Jurisdiction.

Districts. Within an Annual Conference, groups of local churches may be organized together to form a district, “somewhat similar to the way cities and towns are organized into counties” (UMC.org). Each district is led by a district superintendent, a clergy person who is appointed by the bishop to serve in this leadership role. The duties of the district superintendent range from overseeing the ministry of the local churches of the district to providing spiritual and administrative leadership to working with the bishop in appointing pastors to local churches. Our Annual Conference currently has 4 districts combined from 8 previously. Our District Superintendent is Rev. Dr. Debora Bishop.

The Local Church. The local church is a clear and visible sign of Christ’s and the UMC’s presence in the community and world. It is here where most individuals have their first contact with the UMC, not realizing that “they are part of a bigger whole or connection: an annual conference, a jurisdiction, the general church, and churches and annual conferences around the world” (UMC.org). The ministries of the local church are vital to the UMC’s mission, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

(Taken from on-line source Rylan Christian Fernandez).