



5/29/24

Town Hall Meeting #1

Purpose, Ground Rules & Agenda

OPENING PRAYER - Senior Pastor Michael Ritter

PURPOSE: Open, honest conversation to allow church council to hear the thoughts of the congregation on the issues facing Bethany UMC.

We now have a clear picture of the future of the UMC following the 2024 General Conference vote to revise the 2016 BOD and endorse potential regionalization.

This meeting is for you, the congregation, to speak directly to Church Council before their vote on June 26. This June Church Council vote is on whether to end Holy Discernment and Bethany remain a UM congregation or whether we, as a congregation, move forward to a church wide vote to decide to remain in or to separate from the UMC. Once the June Church Council vote occurs, there will be ample time for questions specifically related to those issues moving forward with a church wide vote and are not a part of the purpose of tonight's meeting.

Church Council members are seated up front in order to hear your concerns and opinions clearly.

We intend to have time for some submitted questions that may arise during this meeting concerning the current status of the UMC. Please write down your questions on notecards found in your pew rack - to be addressed at the end of tonight's meeting if time permits.

-Of utmost importance are these 3 attitudes:

Participate with intention. Listen carefully to information and other speakers. When it is your turn to speak, do so in a constructive manner. Speak from your heart.

Appreciate the diversity of perspectives. All perspectives are valid. When someone says something that challenges your thinking, listen to understand why they think as they do.

Maintain a respect for this sacred space. That means we all need to treat each other with kindness and respect. It also means that we all need to avoid distractions.

GROUND RULES:

-The moderator will ensure that all ground rules are enforced.

-Meeting will last 1.5 hours.

Please silence all cell phones/ mobile devices. Please, no recording, texting, etc. during the meeting.

Two microphones are provided up front. Use the microphone of your choice.

There is a 3-minute time limit for each speaker.

A timekeeper will announce when time is up, as well as a 30 second warning.

Speakers must be Professing Members of Bethany UMC.

Speakers must be recognized by the moderator prior to speaking. No one should interrupt or speak unless recognized by the Moderator.

The moderator will allow 10 speakers in favor of remaining with the UMC and 10 speakers in favor of leaving the UMC. We'll alternate speakers for balance.

No one may speak a second time until/unless there are no additional speakers wishing to speak and there is allocated meeting time remaining.

The moderator has the authority to call out anyone that ignores the ground rules.

Negative personal comments and/or profanity will not be tolerated.

Verbal outbursts and/or applause is not allowed.

The moderator can terminate the meeting, if deemed necessary.

Regarding questions

Index cards are available to submit questions. Pass them to the outside end of the aisle so they can be collected.

Note that questions are not to challenge or disagree with a person who is speaking to Church Council. Questions can be for clarification of something that was said.

AGENDA:

SUMMARY OF GENERAL CONFERENCE

MICROPHONE TIME

SUBMITTED QUESTIONS

CLOSING PRAYER

Bethany Town Hall Meeting Q&A's (May & June 2024)

Below are questions and answers related to the UMC 2024 General Conference (GC) and Bethany's discernment process. These questions and answers are intended to provide information to Bethany's congregation to support the May 29, 2024 and June 23, 2024 Town Hall meetings and Bethany's ongoing discernment process. These answers and questions were prepared by the Bethany Discernment Steering Committee and are based on facts and information that are currently available.

2024 United Methodist General Conference (April 23 – May 3, 2024)

Was the language in the Book of Discipline prohibiting the ordination of practicing homosexuals changed or deleted?

Yes. Petition #20177-FO-304.3 was approved by a vote of 692 for and 51 against on 5/1/2024. This petition removed paragraph 304.3 from the UMC Book of Discipline effective May 3, 2024. Paragraph 304.3 was the paragraph that prohibited the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

The result of this petition is that ordination of practicing homosexuals is now allowed in the United Methodist Church.

Was the language in the Book of Discipline prohibiting the performance of same-sex marriages changed or deleted?

Yes. Petition #20469-OM-341.6 was approved by a vote of 447 for and 233 against on 5/3/2024. This petition removed paragraph 341.6 from the UMC Book of Discipline effective May 3, 2024. Paragraph 341.6 was the paragraph that prohibited the performance of same-sex marriage by UMC clergy or performance of a same-sex marriage in a United Methodist church.

Additionally, petition #20387-JA-2711.3 removed language in paragraph 2711.3 that provided penalties for clergy who performed same-sex marriages. This petition was passed on 4/30/24 by a vote of 667 for and 54 against and became effective on May 3, 2024.

The result of these two petitions is that same-sex marriages can now be performed by UMC clergy within United Methodist churches.

Was the language in the Book of Discipline prohibiting the use of UMC funds for promotion of LGQTB+ organizations and causes changed or deleted?

Yes. Petitions #20182-FA-613.19 and #20191-FA-806.9 were approved by a vote of 667 for and 54 against on 4/30/24 and became effective on May 3, 2024. These petitions changed the language in paragraphs 613.19 and 806.9 that prohibited the use of UMC funds to promote LGQTB+ organizations/causes to language that prohibits the use of UMC funds to reject or condemn LGQTB+ persons or causes.

The result of these two petitions is that the UMC may now provide funds to organizations/causes that support LGQTB+ persons/dialogs/events and may not provide funds to organizations/causes that reject or condemn LGQTB+ persons/dialogs/events.

Did the General Conference renew paragraph 2553 from the Book of Discipline that allowed United Methodist Churches within the US to disaffiliate from the UMC over issues with homosexual ordination and same-sex marriage?

No. Petition #21087-CO-2553 was approved by a vote of 519 for and 203 against on 5/1/2024. This petition removed paragraph 2553 from the UMC Book of Discipline effective May 3, 2024. Paragraph 2553 was added at the 2019 Special GC specifically for churches that were unhappy with the passage of the “Traditional Plan” which reaffirmed and strengthened the prohibitions against homosexual ordination and same-sex marriage. This paragraph provided the option for US churches to disaffiliate based on issues with homosexual ordination and/or same-sex marriages. Paragraph 2553 expired on 12/31/2023.

The result of this petition is that paragraph 2553 was not renewed which means that US based United Methodist churches no longer have a specific vehicle for disaffiliation from the UMC. *(Note: Paragraph 2553 was never an option for churches within the SC Annual Conference. Please refer to question #12 below for how this affects Bethany).*

Did the General Conference provide a means for annual conferences within Central Conferences to disaffiliate from the UMC?

No. Petition #21063-ST-500 was rejected by a vote of 137 for and 514 against on 5/3/2024. This petition would have added paragraph 576 to the UMC Book of Discipline which would have provided an option for international United Methodist annual conferences to disaffiliate from the UMC based on issues related to homosexual ordination and/or same-sex marriages.

The result of this petition is that non-US based United Methodist churches will not have an option to disaffiliate from the UMC.

Did the General Conference pass legislation to allow local churches and pastors to make the decision as to whether to hold/perform same-sex marriages?

Yes. Petition #20716-HS-416.7 was approved by a vote of 606 for and 91 against on 5/1/2024 and became effective on 5/3/2024. This petition adds paragraph 416.7 to the UMC Book of Discipline. This new paragraph states that a Bishop may not require or prevent a local church or pastor from performing a same-sex marriage nor can they penalize a pastor for performing or not performing a same-sex wedding.

Additionally, Petition #20713-OM-340.2 was approved by a vote of 479 for and 203 against on 5/3/2024 and became effective on 5/3/2024. This petition amends existing paragraph 304.2 and adds paragraph 304.3 to state that UMC clergy are not required to perform or not perform a same-sex marriage. The decision to perform or not perform any wedding (heterosexual or same-sex) is determined solely by the conscience of the clergy person.

The result of these two petitions is that local churches have the right to decide for themselves whether to allow or not allow a same-sex marriage to take place on their church property. By the same token, the UMC clergy at each local United Methodist church have the right to decide for themselves whether to perform or not perform a same-sex marriage.

What changes were made to the United Methodist Social Principles?

An entire new set of Social Principles were adopted at the 2024 General Conference. This is the first major overhaul to the Social Principles in 50 years. A total of six petitions were submitted and approved that replaced the Social Principles (Preface, Preamble, and paragraphs 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, and 165). All six of these petitions were passed by a 75% or greater vote and will become effective on January 1, 2025.

The changes to the Social Principles related specifically to Bethany's discernment process were items dealing with marriage and homosexuality:

Marriage: 1) The previous language that defined marriage as *"as the union of one man and one woman"* was replaced with *"as a sacred lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith, an adult man and woman of consenting age, or two adult persons of consenting age into union with one another and into deeper relationship with God and the religious community"*. 2) The language stating *"sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage"* was removed from the new Social Principles.

Homosexuality: The language stating that *"The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching"* was removed from the new Social Principles.

Note: The Social Principles are not considered church law. Per the UMC.org website glossary, the Social Principles are a *"document setting forth the basic position of The United Methodist Church on important social issues. The Social Principles represent the effort of the General Conference to speak to human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation."*

Did Regionalization pass at 2024 General Conference?

Yes (and no). The regionalization process requires changes to the UMC constitution and therefore requires a 2/3 majority vote of the GC delegates as well as a 2/3 majority vote of the aggregate of all annual conference delegates worldwide. The six petitions submitted to GC that would start the regionalization process were passed by a 75% or greater vote so the first voting hurdle has been achieved. The petitions will now go to the annual conferences around the world for voting. If approved by the annual conferences, then the votes must be "certified" by the Council of Bishops before regionalization would become effective. This approval and certification process may take up to two years to complete. Of course, if the 2/3 majority vote of AC delegates is not achieved, then the regionalization process will not proceed.

Regionalization will establish a new organizational level (known as a Region) within the US and will cause the existing Central Conferences to be renamed as Regions. Regionalization will allow certain parts of the Book of Discipline to be "adaptable" by each region. Exactly which parts will be "adaptable" is yet to be determined and would be done as part of the regionalization process.

Were delegates from the Central Conferences (specifically from Africa) intentionally prevented from attending the General Conference to limit the number of "traditional" delegates?

No. There is no evidence that this occurred. At prior General Conferences, it was normal for 30 or so delegates from Central Conferences to miss the GC due to visa or travel issues. At the 2024 GC, approximately 90 Central Conference delegates were absent at the start of the conference due to visa and travel issues. Many of these missing delegates did make it to the conference at various times during the two weeks of the conference.

The Judicial Council ruled in December 2022 that the 2020 General Conference was postponed instead of canceled. That ruling meant the delegates for the 2020 GC would be the delegates for the 2024 GC. So, the United Methodist group (Commission on General Conference) responsible for working with the Central Conferences to obtain visas and make travel arrangements knew (with some exceptions) for roughly 16 months prior to the start of the 2024 GC who the Central Conference delegates would be. Despite increased lead times to obtain visas due to Covid backlogs/issues, 16 months should be sufficient time for the visa and travel requirements for the

Central Conference delegates to have been met. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the number of missing delegates (over and above normal numbers) was at worst due to a lack of preparation, lack of planning, and/or poor execution of plans by the Commission on General Conference staff and was not done intentionally.

2024 General Conference Action Effect on Bethany

Will same-sex marriages be performed at Bethany?

Not during the discernment process. As stated in question #6 above, the decision to perform or not perform a same-sex marriage on local church property is left solely to the discretion of the local church and/or the local church clergy. The Bethany Board of Trustees is responsible for use of church facilities. At their meeting on May 9 (after the GC concluded), the BOT voted unanimously to continue to follow the 2016 BOD as it relates to same-sex marriages until Bethany's discernment process is concluded. This means that no same-sex marriages will be performed on church property during the discernment process. The BOT felt it was prudent to keep things as they have been at Bethany until the discernment process is concluded and Bethany's future path is known. Once Bethany's path is known, then the BOT will revisit this issue.

Will a homosexual minister be appointed to Bethany?

Technically possible but highly unlikely. As stated in question #1 above, it is now legal for practicing homosexuals to be ordained within the UMC. Unlike same-sex marriages, there was no new legislation passed that would specifically allow local churches to make the decision on whether to receive a homosexual minister. The appointment process of clergy within the United Methodist Church remained virtually unchanged (see exception below) and is governed by paragraphs 425, 426, 427, & 428 of the Book of Discipline. The appointment of clergy is done via a "consultative process" whereby the needs and desires of the local church (provided by the church's Staff/Parish Relations Committee) are matched with the talents and desires of potential clergy candidates by the District Superintendent and Bishop. This process is intended to ensure the best possible fit between clergy and church. However, paragraphs 425.1 and 428.8 make it clear that the final authority in the appointment process rests with the bishop. This means that the bishop may appoint whoever they chose to any church within their episcopacy. While this may be true, protocol, tradition, and plain old common-sense dictate that a bishop would not intentionally place a clergy person at a church where they know the clergy person would not be a fit. So, while it is technically possible that a homosexual minister could be appointed to a church where they are not a fit, it would be highly unlikely that this would occur.

Paragraph 425.1: *"clergy shall be appointed by the bishop, who is empowered to make and fix all appointments in the episcopal area of which the annual conference is a part."*

Paragraph 428.8: *"the bishop, basing his or her decision on the information and advice derived from consultation, makes and fixes the appointment."*

Petition 20315-HS-425.1G was approved by a vote of 606 for and 91 against on 5/1/24 and became effective on 5/3/24. This petition made changes to paragraph 425.1 to add "sexual orientation" as a factor when considering appointment of clergy. Below is the new approved language:

Responsibility—1. Clergy shall be appointed by the bishop, who is empowered to make and fix all appointments in the episcopal area of which the annual conference is a part. Appointments are to

be made with consideration of the gifts and evidence of God's grace of those appointed, to the needs, characteristics, and opportunities of congregations and institutions, and with faithfulness to the commitment to an open itineracy. Open itineracy means appointments are made without regard to race, ethnicity origin, gender, color, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or age, except for the provisions of mandatory retirement. Annual conferences shall, in their training of staff-parish relations committees, emphasize the open nature of itineracy and prepare congregations to receive the gifts and graces of appointed clergy without regard to race, ethnicity origin, gender, color, disability, marital status, economic condition, sexual orientation, or age. The concept of itineracy is important, and sensitive attention should be given in appointing clergy with physical challenges to responsibilities and duties that meet their gifts and graces. Through appointment-making, the connectional nature of the United Methodist system is made visible.

Does the elimination of paragraph 2553 at General Conference stop Bethany's discernment process?

No. Bethany's discernment process is based on the *Local Church Discernment Process* established by the SC Annual Conference for use by United Methodist Churches located in South Carolina. This process is based on paragraph 2549 of the Book of Discipline. The elimination of paragraph 2553 therefore has no effect on the discernment process being used by SC United Methodist churches in general and Bethany specifically.

Bethany's Discernment Process

What is the current status of Bethany's discernment process?

Bethany has been in Holy Discernment since August 17, 2023 when the Bethany Church Council voted to begin the discernment process. This church council vote came with the caveat that a church wide vote to decide whether to separate from the UMC could not occur until after June 1, 2024. This was done to ensure that the results of the 2024 General Conference would be known prior to a potential church wide vote.

A Discernment Steering Committee was formed and has been working to: 1) promote prayer and spiritual guidance from the Holy Spirit individually and congregationally, 2) to provide accurate and unbiased information on the issues, 3) to promote civil and respectful discussion of the issues, 4) to manage and facilitate the discernment process requirements as put forth in the Local Church Discernment Process.

The Bethany Church Council has held two of five scheduled "Society Meetings" for church council members. These "Society Meetings" are small group meetings based on John Wesley's society meetings. Each meeting focuses on one of the issues affecting the UMC and Bethany (sexual orientation, definition of marriage, Social Principles, Adherence to the BOD, summary of issues) using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The intent is to ensure that the Church Council has a firm understanding of the issues from all perspectives.

What are the next steps in Bethany's discernment process?

Following are the next steps in Bethany's discernment process:

Conclude the Church Council "Society" meetings. Three meetings are still to be held and will be completed in late May/early June.

Conduct two Town Hall meetings with Bethany's congregation. The purpose of these meetings is to allow Church Council to hear the "voice" of the congregation prior to voting on whether to continue the discernment process. This will also provide the congregation the opportunity to

voice their desires/opinions and to ask questions. The two Town Hall meetings are scheduled for Wednesday, May 29 at 6:30 pm and Sunday, June 23 at 4:00 pm.

Church Council to vote on whether to continue the discernment process and allow a separation vote. This Church Council vote will occur on Wednesday, June 26.

If Church Council votes to stop the discernment process, then the process will conclude, no separation vote will occur, and Bethany will remain a United Methodist church.

If Church Council votes to continue the discernment process, then the process will continue to a Church Conference where a vote on whether Bethany will leave the UMC or remain with the UMC will occur. Due to requirements in the Local Church Discernment Process, this Church Conference (separation vote) would most likely occur sometime between January 15, 2025 and March 1, 2025.

If Church Council votes to continue the discernment process and allow a “separation” vote, does that mean that Bethany is leaving the United Methodist denomination?

No. A vote by Church Council to continue the discernment process and allow a “separation” vote simply means that Bethany would continue the discernment process to its conclusion and ultimately hold a Church Conference for the purpose of voting on whether to separate from the United Methodist Church. The Church Conference would be scheduled by the District Superintendent. At this Church Conference, a two thirds majority (67%) or better of Bethany professing members must vote for separation for separation to occur.

Who will be allowed to vote on separation if we get to that point?

To vote in a Church Conference, a person must be a professing member of the church as prescribed by paragraphs 215 (Definition of Membership), 216 (The Meaning of Membership), and 248 (The Church Conference) of the Book of Discipline. The United Methodist Church glossary defines a professing member as “a baptized person who has taken vows declaring the Christian faith. Professing members include all people who have come into membership by profession of faith or by transfer from other churches.”

All of the persons that are currently listed as “full members” on Bethany’s membership role meet the requirements as listed above for professing member and would be eligible to vote in a Bethany Church Conference.

At what age is someone considered eligible to vote if a separation vote is held?

Any baptized youth who has completed confirmation would be considered a professing member and would be eligible to vote. Normally, confirmation occurs when a youth is 13 or 14 years old. However, the Book of Discipline and Judicial Council Decision #1032 allows the Senior Pastor to accept the profession of faith from a person younger than normal confirmation age if the Pastor feels that the youth is ready to accept the vows made during the profession of faith.

Is the Bethany membership role up to date? If not, will it be updated to remove members who no longer belong?

The Bethany membership role has not been updated recently so it is likely that several of the persons currently on the role no longer consider themselves to be Bethany members. However, as long as those persons remain on the membership role, they would be eligible to vote at a Bethany Church Conference. To vote at the Church Conference, they would have to physically attend the Church Conference (i.e. no absentee or remote voting is allowed).