



Frequently Asked Questions regarding the Disaffiliation lawsuits

What is this current conflict about?

This current conflict is about the application of the provisions of *The Book of Discipline* related to the process of disaffiliation. The Florida Conference agrees that churches have the right to disaffiliate through the process outlined in *The Book of Discipline* and has consistently worked with churches who desire to do so. Paragraph (¶) 2553 of *The Book of Discipline* details the way in which a church may disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church. At our Annual Conference session in June, [14 churches officially disaffiliated](#) through the established process spelled out by ¶ 2553. Now, a different group of churches filed a lawsuit to disaffiliate in a different way.

Where can I find a copy of the lawsuit?

A copy of the lawsuit and a list of the churches who filed the lawsuit can be found on the Bradford County Circuit Court [website](#) or by [clicking here](#).

Who was named as a defendant in the lawsuit?

In addition to naming The Board of Trustees of The Florida Annual Conference Inc., the lawsuit has named the following defendants: Bishop Ken Carter, Craig Smelser (our conference treasurer), Rev. Alex Shanks (our Assistant to the Bishop); Yoniece Dixon, Jim Manuel, James L. Luther (the three officers of our Conference Board of Trustees); and the eight district superintendents: Rev. Dionne Hammond, Rev. Bob Bushong, Rev. Emily Hotho, Rev. David Allen, Rev. Durwood Foshee, Rev. Debbie Allen, Rev. Cynthia Weems, and Rev. Wayne Wiatt.

Is this about LGBTQ inclusion?

Some of the churches involved in this effort have openly shared their concerns with The United Methodist Church on matters involving our LGBTQ members and the desire to allow marriage and ordination in life of the church. The lawsuit, however, appears to focus on the process by which churches disaffiliate from the annual conference. The lawsuit does mention The United Methodist Church's doctrine and the *Discipline's* regulations on LGBTQ marriage and ordination. The United Methodist Church's doctrinal standards have not changed and [cannot be changed](#), even as we continue on a journey to be a church that serves all people. The [Social Principles](#) of The United Methodist Church can only be changed by the General Conference.

How many churches are seeking to disaffiliate through this lawsuit?

That is unclear, as we have seen conflicting numbers. The lawsuit lists 106 churches in The Florida Conference as plaintiffs who are represented by attorneys from the [National Center for Life and Liberty](#). Of the 106 churches we understand are represented by the National Center for Life and Liberty, we know of none that held an official congregational vote (a charge or church conference under ¶ 246-258 of *The Book of Discipline*) to agree to hire this law firm or to officially vote to disaffiliate from the Conference. We understand in some cases there may not have been an official vote of the local church's Board of Trustees or Church Council. Our initial count of membership in these churches suggests it represents about 15% of the total professing membership of all the churches in our Florida

Conference. The Florida Conference has 574 churches and missions, 12 campus ministries, and over 300 Fresh Expressions of Church.

Why do these churches want to leave the annual conference immediately and under a different process?

We don't know why there is a rush to depart. *The Book of Discipline* has not changed and cannot be changed until the General Conference meets in 2024. Some of those advocating for an abrupt separation supported the process for disaffiliation that was added to our *Book of Discipline* as [¶ 2553](#), at the Special Session of General Conference in 2019. We are asking that they now follow that process. An abrupt separation without the appropriate time for discernment and vote by a local congregation could create further concerns and division within a local congregation. [¶ 2553](#) was approved by the General Conference to address concerns related to our long-time commitments to retired clergy and our important connectional ministries. An abrupt separation without fulfilling their obligations as outlined under [¶ 2553](#) could damage benefits and pensions for retired pastors and their spouses who devoted their lives to service, or the apportionment churches give to support our camps, the United Methodist Children's Home, campus ministries, natural disaster response projects, and missions abroad.

What is the Trust Clause and how is it connected to this lawsuit?

In The United Methodist Church, each local church property is locally owned and held "In Trust" on behalf of the overall Church. Should a local church close or cease to be a part of The United Methodist Church, [the trust clause provisions](#) in *The Book of Discipline* apply and require the property to revert back to the annual conference. For a more detailed understanding of how the Trust Clause may be connected to this lawsuit, click [here](#) for a recent United Methodist News Service article that quotes a leading church law expert who recently led a webinar with Good News, a theologically conservative advocacy group that, like the WCA, is seeking to ease church transitions into the Global Methodist Church.

How has the Florida Conference worked with churches who wish to disaffiliate?

In 2019, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church created a path for churches to disaffiliate and retain that property and it is found in [¶ 2553](#). With all churches who have requested to disaffiliate under [¶ 2553](#), we have acted in good faith to assist them in their departure. In response to the law firm who recently filed this lawsuit, we agreed to meet with them in good faith once the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church had made a [ruling on Paragraph 2548.2](#), which is the paragraph listed in the lawsuit. Claims that we have not been willing to meet with our local churches and process disaffiliations are simply untrue.

What are the requirements and financial payment for churches who want to leave under Paragraph 2553?

Paragraph 2553, as approved by the General Conference in 2019 and supported by many of the organizations who are encouraging churches to disaffiliate, [can be found here](#). It outlines a clear process that invites churches into a season of discernment and requires a 2/3 majority vote of the church membership and the approval of the annual conference.

In Florida, we have had a total of 17 churches over the last two years utilize this process. Each church has received a disaffiliation checklist from their District office. The checklist outlines the method for churches to receive their financial obligations, as outlined in [¶ 2553](#). These obligations from each church vary based on the size of the church and include the payment of any unpaid apportionments for 12 months immediately preceding the disaffiliation, payment of an additional 12 months of

apportionments, and payment of the local church's pro rata share of the annual conference's pension obligations. To read more about the annual conference's pension obligations, please see [the Wespath FAQ here](#). The 2019 General Conference also overwhelmingly passed another measure — [¶ 1504.23](#) — that requires departing churches to pay a fair share of pension obligations no matter what mechanism they use to exit the denomination. The limited role of the annual conference is to determine what a local church's share is based on their percentage of apportionment giving. After this process is complete, the church leaves the denomination with its property and assets.

Paragraph 2553 allows annual conferences to “develop additional standard terms that are not inconsistent with the standard form of this paragraph.” Some annual conferences have added financial terms. The Florida Conference has not added any financial terms. The Florida Conference Board of Trustees, who is the church body tasked with approving disaffiliation agreements, does require any disaffiliating church to procure liability insurance to protect its congregation, The Florida Conference and other conference churches against claims made after disaffiliation.

If I want to learn more about The United Methodist Church and its future, where can I get accurate information?

As the conversation on the continuing United Methodist Church progresses, [this webpage](#) will provide resources to help address questions that many are asking such as: Why should I stay in the UMC?; Tell me how to leave if I don't want to stay; How do I know if there will be place for me? An additional resource [can be found here](#).

How/when do we expect this conflict to be resolved?

The legal process can be lengthy and complicated. In response to a letter from the law firm who recently filed this lawsuit sent in mid-June, we agreed to meet with them in good faith once the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church had made a [ruling on ¶ 2548.2](#). We remain hopeful that we can meet with them and resolve this conflict through application of the provisions of *The Book of Discipline*, but, because these churches have filed a lawsuit, we have no choice but to participate in that legal process, regardless of its uncertain outcome.

How can I accurately understand The United Methodist Church's mission, vision and values?

The [mission](#) of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The United Methodist Church is a [worldwide connection](#) of more than 12 million members in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States. We are the person next door, the church on the other side of the country, and the worshiping community across the globe. Together, we share a legacy of living as disciples of Jesus Christ, sharing God's love both in what we say and how we serve our neighbors. More information on The Florida Conference's mission, vision, and mindsets [can be found here](#).

I am in a church exploring disaffiliation, but I want to remain United Methodist. What resources are available?

[UMsConnected](#) is a website, podcast, and newsletter that aims to be a resource for bringing people together in a time of too much separation. UMsConnected is not a substitute for the larger Church, just as early Methodism was not. The intent of UMsConnected is to provide online Wesleyan formation opportunities that offer Christ in meaningful and innovative ways.