

Period of Local Church Discernment

Although each local church's discernment will be a process proposed by the local church and approved by the district superintendent, below are some ideas for what type of activities might be helpful in this discernment period. We recognize each local church is unique and the best way to hold conversations and communicate with membership will vary church to church. This process is meant for the local church, not the pastor. A clergy might also enter personal discernment on where they feel called, but that is an individual decision and distinct from congregational discernment.

The process should begin with a majority vote of one of your leadership boards (governing board, one board, church council, or their equivalent). The result of this vote is sent to your district superintendent with notification the local church is beginning discernment. If you have not previously held conversation with your district superintendent now is the time to begin an ongoing conversation throughout this period of discernment. This process can be guided by the pastor but should include a designated lay person who represents and communicates back to the congregation.

Discernment is a period of understanding the congregation, hearing from your membership about their hopes for the future and determining where God is calling your church. This process is grounded in information, communication, and prayer.

Discernment will not necessarily end in a vote. Discernment may end in conversation that agrees remaining a UMC congregation is best for your church and community. It might, however, culminate in a vote of the church conference (membership of the church) asking them to self-determine their future affiliation as a congregation.

We recommend the discernment period be no fewer than 40 days of prayer and discernment prior to a church conference vote of disaffiliation/affiliation. Your local church discernment process should be reviewed by your district superintendent for feedback and approval.

Below is a list of the types of activities and questions to consider as part of your congregational discernment process.

Activities: Careful attention to the environment for activities is important to provide participants the proper atmosphere of reverence, intentionality, respect, listening, and learning.

- Consider forming intentional times of prayer for the congregation
- Attend a Future Discernment Task Force District meeting
- Create congregational Surveys
- Host Conversation Dinners
- Hold Straw poll

- Town Hall gatherings
- Small group feedback and listening sessions
- Creating a central collection point (email, point person, collection box) to receive questions, input, and feedback
- Creation of an ad hoc team to investigate costs associated with disaffiliating. The costs are more than what is paid to the Annual Conference. Costs to consider are legal costs for filing deeds, changing articles of incorporation, signage, etc.
- Creation of an ad hoc team to investigate options for future affiliation along with costs, pros, cons, and clarity on theological and strategic alignment

Questions: Good questions can sometimes be more helpful than answers. Think through the types of questions your congregation needs to consider during this period and in what ways and places will these questions be posed.

- What are the reasons we are entering this time of discernment? What are the issues for us as a congregation?
- What is our history on these subjects? What do we affirm? What are the non-negotiables?
- How will this time of discernment influence our greater community?
- Who are we? Why do we exist as a congregation?
- What is God's will for our congregation?
- What is connectionism? What are the benefits and draw backs? What is the connectional history of this congregation?
- What will this cost to stay (emotionally, spiritually, etc.)
- What is the cost of leaving (emotionally, spiritually, etc.)
- What is the cost of even talking about leaving?
- What is the cost financially? Legally?
- How will/can we love and honor one another through this process, even if we are not in agreement on the issues?
- If we discern leaving the UMC, where might we go that helps us be the congregation God needs us to be? What are our options?
- Consider entering into a comparison/contrast study of United Methodist polity/theology vs. any other denomination under consideration.
- Discuss Advantages/Disadvantages of remaining connected with the Texas Annual Conference:
 - Impact on existing relationships
 - Impact on possible loss of Annual Conference resources such as Innovation Grants, Ministry Specialists, New Faith Communities
 - Impact on future Pastoral Appointments

Typical Discernment process

From beginning to end this process should take at least forty days

- The possibility of entering discernment can be raised to the church council for approval by either the pastor or member of the congregation.
- Church Council (or equivalent) votes to begin the process
- Members attend or watch the recorded version of a District meeting led by the Future Discernment Task Force
- Congregational meetings are held where information is shared and questions are answered about
 - remaining in the United Methodist Church (UMC)
 - joining the Global Methodist Church (GMC)
 - costs for leaving the UMC (apportionments and unfunded pension liability as well as legal costs for changing documents, construction costs for removing cross and flame logo)
 - any other alternatives being considered (such as non-denominational, Free Methodist, United Church of Christ or other denominations)
- Online resources are shared, including Navigating the Waters on www.txcumc.org
- Prayer guides for discernment
- Upon completion of the process, if the Church Council believes there is sufficient interest in having a vote, the District Superintendent calls the church conference with the required notifications including the motion for changing affiliation. During that conference
 - Prayer is offered.
 - Members eligible to vote are identified and written ballots distributed
 - A motion to change from the UMC to a specific new status (GMC, non-denominational or other denomination) is made
 - Opportunity is provided for speeches for and against
 - The vote is taken
 - The vote is counted immediately, and the result announced. Under *Book of Discipline* paragraph 2553 (which is what Cabinet recommends) if 2/3 of those present and voting approve, the motion for a new relationship is passed.
 - *Book of Discipline* Paragraph 2548.2 requires a simple majority but is under review by the judicial council. This pathway is not recommended and might be overturned.
- The local church trustees are then authorized to complete the necessary documents with the Annual Conference.