

Dear PUMC Family -

This is one of those of long letters that will not appeal to everyone, but is meant to be an informational letter regarding my understanding of the current state of the United Methodist Church, another postponement of General Conference, and the launch of the Global Methodist Church on May 1, 2022. I pray that the people of the Panama UMC will find this information helpful for the weeks and months ahead.

I will start by saying that we find ourselves in a grieving process. Stacy and I have been attending a United Methodist Church our whole lives, first with our individuals families, and then as a married couple, with our children. I was baptized in my first year, confirmed in my 12th year, served on every team in the local church, learned to preach and lead worship, was married in the UMC, had our children baptized in the UMC. We have been nurtured, supported, and loved in the UMC. I was ordained in the UMC and have served as a UMC pastor for almost 19 years. In that time, there have been many changes in the world, in our lives (now grandparents!) and, in the UMC. The current challenges in the UMC, outlined below based on disobedience to what we as United Methodists have agreed to live into, are sources of deep grief in our lives in this season.

Before we move into our challenges, I'll start with some background information. The UMC is a global church, meaning that all United Methodists around the world have a say in what we agree we believe... our doctrine. The process of deciding on and agreeing what we believe happens every four years in a setting called General Conference. Elected representatives called delegates gather from around the world to set our beliefs, procedures, etc. This is the only group of people who are authorized to make policy for the UMC. The membership of General Conference is based on church membership in the various conferences. The governmental structure of the UMC also includes a Judicial Council (our version of the Supreme Court) and a Council of Bishops, elected regionally to help us live into what we agree together that we believe and by which we will be governed.

The UMC in the Philippines and Africa is growing exponentially, and the U.S. part of the UMC is in membership decline. Because of that, the U.S. representation of the UMC does not have the votes at General Conference to change official UMC beliefs, even as the U.S. changes on many social and cultural issues. Because the vote at General Conference is taken from representation from around the world, the official stance on topics like marriage, abortion, and historical church teachings about Jesus have remained substantially the same since the UMC was formed in 1968 from a merger between the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church. The reason for the historically consistent views on those topics is because the UMC in many places outside the U.S. has a more traditional and conservative view of the authority of scripture, marriage, and the teaching of the church. Maintaining the status quo in membership throughout the globe means the General Conferences of the foreseeable future are only going to strengthen the consequences for disobedience to our agreed upon teachings, including the centrality of historical Biblical teachings such as the virgin birth, Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the view of historic Christianity affirming God's plan for biological male/female monogamous marriages. This is because those who believe our current teaching is Biblical are an expanding majority in the worldwide UMC and are supportive of the current teachings of the church. The adherence to the teachings, however, has not weathered the change well in America.

One of the main areas of disobedience in the church today comes as the result of the UMC stance on Christian marriage. All people are welcome in the church and are loved by God, but our United Methodist doctrine agrees with the majority of Christians throughout the world that the Bible teaches that sexual intimacy is a gift of God to be shared exclusively between a man and a woman and only in marriage. Therefore, the official teaching of the UMC does not permit same sex weddings in our churches and does not allow self-avowed homosexual persons to serve as pastors in the UMC, unless they agree to remain celibate. The same prohibition would prevent either member of an unmarried man/woman couple who were in an intimate relationship from being a pastor, per our Book of Discipline, which outlines our shared understanding of what being United Methodist means. The reason persons in same-sex relations are mentioned specifically in our beliefs as not being qualified to become a pastor is because at the time the language was inserted (1980s), nobody was advocating for

heterosexual persons in sexual relationships outside of marriage to be permitted to be pastors. Even that has likely changed in the American church, but not in the UMC official beliefs.

Even though the global church seeks to maintain the current doctrine of the UMC, there is a vast swath of the American church (certainly not all of any category including pastors, UMC leaders, and/or bishops) that disagrees with the official stance on various issues and believe that our current teaching is discriminatory and hurtful. Those who agree with the current beliefs find it logical for those who cannot abide by the teachings to depart the UMC to join or begin a new denomination. The progressive American United Methodists who advocate for changing our polity have drawn the line in the sand. With few exceptions, they are not leaving the UMC. Instead, with their frustration building with each passing conference, they believe disobedience is required to fight what they view as injustices, particularly to the LGBTQ community. This began to impact the church in irreversible ways in 2016 when, against our rules, the Western Jurisdiction of the UMC elected a married lesbian bishop. The UMC Judicial Council ruled that election was in violation of our agreed upon rules. Like the Supreme Court, however, those making the ruling were not in charge of enforcement of their ruling. The other bishops in the Western Jurisdiction are the ones in charge of the enforcement. Rather than abide by the Judicial Council decision and uphold our Book of Discipline, they instead disregarded the ruling and our church policy. There is nothing anyone can do about that.

Little by little, the flood gates have been opening and more and more self-avowed homosexual pastors are being sent on by their conference boards of ordained ministry to become pastors in the UMC. While all pastors have taken a vow to uphold church teaching, the bishops are given the responsibility of enforcing our doctrine and holding those in violation accountable. The rest of the church can only watch as the official church teachings and Judicial Council rulings are ignored and disregarded by many bishops and boards.

Most parties had hoped the 2020 General Conference would bring a solution as the traditionalists were willing to leave the denomination since the progressives were not. A compromise had been reached by an unofficial diverse group working with Kenneth Feinberg, the mediator who had been the Special Master of the U.S. government's September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. He volunteered his time to help us come to the agreement called the *Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation*. Most believed the proposal to allow traditionalists to begin a new expression of Methodism would be passed and an amicable separation would occur in 2020. Had the conference been held and the agreement passed, the traditional denomination would have received \$25 Million to begin their denomination and churches would have received the UMC's blessing to leave with their church property. Enter the Covid-19 pandemic which changed the world as we knew it. Now, after three cancelled General Conferences (2020, 2021, and now 2022), we have learned the next General Conference will not be held until 2024. Unwilling to wait two more years, the leaders of the traditionalists who organized seven years ago and have been waiting patiently for a peaceful resolution, even encouraging traditional churches to wait, finally announced they were launching the new Global Methodist Church on May 1, 2022.

This brings us up-to-date on the crisis in a nutshell. The headlines in the media the last few days read, "Conservative group to split off from UMC over LGBTQ rights." If you have read this far, I hope I have adequately helped you to understand this is not the full story. The denomination is in turmoil and the splintering is taking place because of the lack of obedience and accountability to our rules, and divergent views on the authority of scripture, including human sexuality, but not limited to that. As many pastors and churches, and some Bishops, attempt to remain faithful to UMC doctrine, others feel justified in disobedience to our agreed upon teaching. This will undoubtedly go on for at least two more years. Kicking the General Conference 'can' down the road may or may not lead to a mass exodus of either traditional or progressive UMC churches. Obviously, if nothing changes it is very likely that it will be difficult for the U.S. progressives to pass their agenda in 2024. If nothing changes and the traditionalist voices are affirmed in the UMC, we have already seen how little that means.

However, there seems to be significant interest in the Global Methodist Church. The bishops have even recently asked for a ruling as to whether an entire annual conference can leave without General Conference approval. There is only one reason to ask for this ruling – there must be rumblings that some regions are thinking about leaving the UMC. The

disaffiliation of many traditionalists to the GM Church, to another denomination, or to become independent would naturally increase the odds of the progressive agenda finally passing UMC General Conference at some point.

All churches and congregation members, traditional, centrist, and progressive, have a difficult choice to make. One option is to stay in the UMC two more years and see what happens at General Conference 2024, continuing in the status quo, financing the UMC and bishops, and either tolerating disobedience or cheering it. Another option is for churches and pastors to work within the current UMC framework to seek their bishop's and conference's blessing to buy their way out of the UMC. This buyout is necessary for multiple reasons, including benefits owed to pastors from 35 years ago (where funds may be lacking from past decisions) and the UMC Trust Clause (<https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-united-methodist-trust-clause>) which says that the church belongs not to the local congregation, but to the UMC as a whole. The negotiated buyout cost would pay the local church's share of what the retired pastors are owed, and would give the local church the deed transferring ownership to each local congregation, free to follow their own callings and chart their own futures.

As I said when I began, this barely scratches the surface on what you need to know. I have written this from my own knowledge and that of others to inform/remind us of some basics and to point out that Panama UMC has an approaching choice coming over the horizon. Be assured that we are not being caught unaware of all these developments over the past 3-4 years. Our Church Council has been following this closely and will be able to help advise the congregation in the near future. Please be in prayer about the future of the UMC, the GMC, and Panama UMC.

In time, the Panama UMC can choose to decide to remain UMC or join the GMC. The ramification of continuing in the UMC may be that the polity of the UMC will change and the denomination will officially step away from the historic confession of our doctrine regarding human sexuality and the authority of scripture, along with some of the other foundational doctrines I've mentioned. A move to the GMC will give us a greater opportunity to live into the historic faith and practice of ministry that we've known and affirmed. Other changes for churches moving to the GM Church will be a name change, approximately 50% less ministry shares sent to the General and Annual Conference (approximately \$22,000 for PUMC per year), and churches gain ownership of their building. If we choose to leave, we will need to join other churches in our Conference to negotiate a pathway to disaffiliation.

Leaders in the UMC and our Bishop Mark Webb are working with other Bishops and the Upper NY Conference Trustees and have solidified a pathway for churches to exit the UMC and join with the GM Church that will not result in exorbitant sums of money changing hands. However, there will be a cost. These discussions have sought to utilize the disaffiliation paragraph 2553 in the 2019 UMC Book of Discipline. There are certain legal fees that will be needed, one year's worth of conference ministry shares, and a lump sum payment for the unfunded retiree pension liability for which each church is responsible currently in the UMC. Currently, the unfunded pension liability for the Panama UMC is \$98,000. One year's worth of ministry shares is \$45,000. If you add legal fees and closing costs, the total cost to disaffiliate will be around \$150,000. That final figure may go down if the pension liability in UNY Conference goes down.

For us at Panama UMC, our next step is to be in prayer for discernment in this season. We will be organizing times for us to discuss this in the near future here and regionally. We are not alone in this. I encourage everyone to attend those informational sessions to be informed. We must have all the facts prior to any decisions. This will also take patience and grace from you and our church family. I also ask that, as we enter into this season, we do this together and refrain from spreading rumors or misinformation about this process. I am not yet certain how God will answer our prayers, but would ask you to join me in them. Know that I continue to love all of you and love serving the Panama UMC as we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by giving every person in our community the opportunity to believe in and follow Jesus.

Blessings,
Pastor Steve