

Recommendation from RUMC Discernment Team to the Board of Stewards

On June 13, 2023, the Discernment Team at Riverchase United Methodist Church (RUMC) voted in favor of recommending to the Board of Stewards that RUMC disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church (UMC). Subsequently, on June 19, 2023, the Discernment Team voted in favor of recommending that RUMC join The Foundry Network. This recommendation is based on the following:

- **Concern relating to the lack of leadership and accountability within The United Methodist Church to enforce the Book of Discipline.**

The provisions in the Book of Discipline relating to human sexuality are referenced in Paragraph 341.6¹ which prohibits homosexual marriages and Paragraph 304.3² that prohibits homosexual clergy. These provisions have been the source of many disputes and much division within the United Methodist Church for decades. At a special called General Conference held in 2019, the Traditional Plan was passed by a vote of 438-384, which upheld and preserved the language within the above-mentioned paragraphs. Despite this decision, several Bishops and members of clergy have operated in violation of these prohibitions. The failure of leadership and lack of accountability within the UMC to hold these individuals responsible and accountable for their actions has created a lack of trust.

- **Concern about the continued division and conflict within the United Methodist Church and RUMC specifically.**

The issues regarding human sexuality within the UMC have been ongoing. Our church has been discussing the issue since the passage of Paragraph 2553³ in 2019. There has been national attention brought to the matter, and each General Conference presents additional discussion around the topic. We do not see an end to this divisiveness with the upcoming General Conference. In summary, this conflict has distracted and has the potential to continue to deflect RUMC from the true mission of our church which is “Sharing the Joy of Christ”.

- **Concern regarding the lack of options for potential disaffiliation after Paragraph 2553 expires on December 31, 2023.**

The right to disaffiliate under Paragraph 2553 will expire on December 31, 2023. The Discernment Team was notified of a Trustee extension document in April 2023. [Click here to view the Trustee extension document](#). At the time, this document was not released to the public by the Trustees, but we were able to view it as a team. This extension document was discussed extensively during our meetings.

Initially, we felt confident that the document would allow a church to be granted additional time to make an informed decision regarding potential disaffiliation until after the General Conference to be held on April 23, 2024. We also believed that if the Book of Discipline was changed at the General Conference in 2024, a more gracious exit could potentially be possible for RUMC.

Since the North Alabama Conference did not provide adequate and specific details to our satisfaction regarding this Trustee extension document, two members of the Discernment Team met with Rick Owen, District Superintendent for the North Alabama Conference, to attempt to gain additional information and clarification. During this meeting, we were informed that if RUMC decided to disaffiliate under the umbrella of the Trustee extension document, we would have to wait to be formally released until the North Alabama Annual Conference in June 2024. We also learned that the Trustee extension document would be posted on the North Alabama Conference website. It was subsequently not posted but was made available at a church's request.

Below is an excerpt from the Board of Trustees extension document:

“The North Alabama Conference Board of Trustees is committed to use their authority within the parameters of the Book of Discipline to seek a gracious, fair and non-punitive separation process for local churches for the period following the General Conference meeting in 2024 through December 31, 2024, if the General Conference meeting in 2024 adopts legislation related to human sexuality that causes a local church to believe it is untenable to continue as a United Methodist church.”

The above statement caused us to question if the extension document would still be valid and allow a gracious exit for a church if no new legislation was passed at the General Conference in 2024. Upon further correspondence with the President of the North Alabama Conference Board of Trustees, it was determined by the Discernment Team that if no new legislation was passed at General Conference 2024, RUMC would not be granted an opportunity to disaffiliate from the UMC.

Furthermore, while the Trustees' intention was to use the parameters within the Book of Discipline to allow a church a gracious, fair, and non-punitive separation, we were concerned that if we chose to disaffiliate after the General Conference, Paragraph 2553 would have expired, and the Board of Trustees may not be able to offer a separation under the same favorable conditions.

At this time, we are unsure if the Book of Discipline will be changed at the General Conference 2024 and were not given any specific details to our satisfaction on how the disaffiliation process would work under the Trustee extension document.

Due to these reasons, we were not comfortable relying on the Trustee extension document for a gracious exit beyond the expiration of Paragraph 2553 on December 31, 2023.

We anticipated the last disaffiliation session to occur in October 2023. The final session for disaffiliation was advanced by the UMC and moved to September 12, 2023. In addition to this earlier disaffiliation date, the deadline for disaffiliation documents and fees was expedited to August 1, 2023. In previous disaffiliation sessions, this document and fee deadline would have been set for the first day of the disaffiliation month. For example, the document/fee deadline for the May 11, 2023, disaffiliation session was set for May 1, 2023.

A request to be allowed additional time past the August 1, 2023, deadline was sent to the North Alabama Conference. That request was denied.

- **Several Wesleyan options are available for churches to align with after disaffiliation.**

It was important for the Discernment Team to find a group to align with after disaffiliation rather than going totally independent. We wanted a group that supported our Wesleyan-based theology which we embraced while part of the United Methodist Church. Two viable options emerged: The Global Methodist Church and The Foundry Network.

While both choices have good qualities, The Foundry Network rose to the top of our list for many reasons including:

- It is a group of large, like-minded churches that intend to hold each other accountable and support each other when needed. This allows us to operate autonomously yet have access to a support system of churches that are similar to ours.
- The pool of pastoral and church staff candidates is wide and deep, allowing us to recruit beyond a single denomination to find the candidates best suited for Riverchase. Additionally, The Foundry Network is identifying and preparing quality individuals within the network to take on roles at other network churches.
- There is no “fair share apportionment” cost to affiliate with The Foundry Network. The Global Methodist Church is currently collecting 2.5% and could raise that to 6% or 7% in the future. Keeping more of our congregation’s tithes, offerings, and gifts at home will allow us to be responsive and flexible in supporting missions and ministries that are important to us.

[Click here for more information on The Foundry Network.](#)

The Process

On January 22, 2023, the Board of Stewards voted 34-22 to officially enter the discernment process. A team of 11 individuals was selected. The Discernment Team's first meeting occurred on February 19, 2023, with Rick Owen, the District Superintendent, in attendance. Since that time, the Discernment Team has engaged in many discussions, met for numerous hours, and researched multiple issues. All of these have been spirit-led and prayerfully considered.

To determine how RUMC members wished to be educated during discernment, a questionnaire was sent to the congregation. After reviewing the results, the team developed and implemented an educational plan. The series consisted of 16 sessions held on Sundays and Wednesdays to accommodate the largest number of congregants. Each session was capped at 50 people to provide smaller environments in hopes that this setting would allow for more discussion.

The educational sessions were also utilized by the Discernment Team as listening opportunities. The team was able to hear congregants' questions, concerns, and thoughts during the Q and A segments. The educational sessions concluded on June 4, 2023, with a combined attendance total of 309.

Accompanying our educational sessions, RUMC also hosted three speakers. These speakers included:

- Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett, North Alabama Conference
- Lyle Holland, Global Methodist Church
- Bryan Collier, The Foundry Network

Overall, the Discernment Team has dedicated significant time discerning God's will for RUMC. Countless hours were also spent preparing documents, drafting emails, preparing for educational sessions, attending meetings, coordinating speakers, and facilitating the discernment process. As a team, we have worked extremely hard to do our very best for RUMC. This is not stated for recognition but instead to ensure to RUMC members that the Discernment Team has done our due diligence, and that our findings have been well thought out, spiritually led, and prayerfully considered.

RUMC Financial Plan

The total cost to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church is \$460,059. The church has current cash on hand of approximately \$785,000 as of June 16, 2023. If RUMC moves forward with disaffiliation, the Discernment Team recommends that we borrow \$250,000 in the form of a line of credit and pay the remaining cost from our current cash on hand. Cash on hand after the payment would be \$574,941. The RUMC Finance Committee will meet and make final recommendations to the Board of Stewards at the appropriate time.

Costs of Disaffiliation:	
Unpaid Fair Share 2022*	\$67,370
Unpaid Fair Share 2023*	\$212,370
Unpaid Clergy Benefits Balance	\$96,161
Grant Funds Received from Conference	\$0
Unfunded Pension Liability	\$84,158
Total	\$460,059
Plan for Payment by August 1, 2023	
Current Operating Cash	\$210,059
Bank Debt	\$250,000
Remaining Cash on Hand	\$574,941

*Note: * The unpaid fair share for 2022 and 2023 is our portion of the apportionments that would be paid over time (monthly) if we stay with the United Methodist Church. While the total is \$460,059, the true cost to leave UMC is \$180,319.*

If the church were to disaffiliate, the Discernment Team recommends a capital campaign be started to retire the line of credit debt in one year and replenish current cash on hand.

RUMC currently has our loan with Cadence Bank (formerly BancorpSouth) in the amount of \$3,584,254 as of June 15, 2023. The Finance Committee has been in discussion with the bank, and they have agreed to keep our current note in place. We will need to update our title insurance due to the trust clause being removed from our property deed. All other terms of the loan remain the same.

Summary

After carrying out our commission from the Board of Stewards and based on the rationale provided herein, the Discernment Team recommends that RUMC would be best served to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church and affiliate with The Foundry Network. This recommendation, if accepted by the Board of Stewards, will give our congregation the ability to voice their collective opinion through a church-wide vote.

Whatever direction a vote may take us, it is our sincere desire that RUMC move forward as a renewed church, one that loves each and every one equally despite differing opinions, one that is firmly planted in our Wesleyan doctrine, and one that can carry out our shared vision of "Sharing the Joy of Christ" without the distractions and divisiveness of the past several years.

Appendix

1Book of Discipline 341.6

Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.

2Book of Discipline 304.3

While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

3Paragraph 2553

Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.

Important Dates set by the North Alabama Conference

- **August 1, 2023**—Deadline for congregations to turn in all disaffiliation-related documentation and financial payments due to the Annual Conference.
- **September 12, 2023**—Special Session of the North Alabama Annual Conference to be held with the purpose of processing current requests for disaffiliation under ¶2553 of the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. This is the final of three gatherings the North Alabama Annual Conference will have to vote on disaffiliations for churches under *Book of Discipline* ¶2553.
- **December 31, 2023**—The ¶2553 Disaffiliation Process, which was added to the *Book of Discipline* by the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference expires.