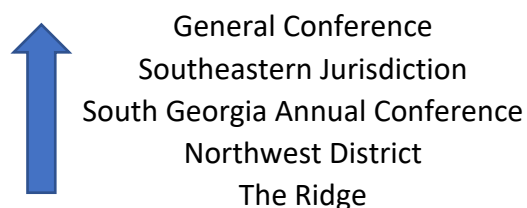


The Ridge Discernment Overview

The Ridge Church has an opportunity in 2024 to discuss our future as a part of The United Methodist Church. The Ridge Discernment Team wants to provide everyone with information to consider as you pray about the upcoming decision. We will continue to update this webpage as we gather additional details.

A Refresher on the Structure of The United Methodist Church (UMC)

The Ridge United Methodist Church is an example of the backbone of our denomination. The **local church** is where the spiritual rubber meets the proverbial road. Each local church is part of a **district**, and the district is given oversight by a **district superintendent**. Ours is the Northwest District, and our superintendent is The Rev. Doreen Smalls. Each district is part of an **annual conference**, which is overseen by a **bishop**. Our conference is the South Georgia Conference, and our bishop is Bishop David Graves. Annual conferences are grouped together into **jurisdictions** with ours being the Southeastern Jurisdiction. The primary job of a jurisdiction is to elect bishops to provide leadership and oversight. All the jurisdictions from across the globe form what we call the **General Conference**. If you think of annual conferences as states, the General Conference is like the federal government and the Book of Discipline (i.e., BoD) is like our constitution. The General Conference, which is supposed to convene every four years, is the only body that can speak on behalf of the UMC and the only body that can change our theology and doctrine (as found in the BoD).



What is the issue?

The Theology and Doctrine of The United Methodist Church is contained within our Book of Discipline. Many say that human sexuality is not the primary issue before us—it is simply the presenting symptom of a deeper theological rift within our denomination (more on this to be shared in the upcoming months). However, human sexuality and sexual ethics are in the headlines. Our BoD states that an active, practicing same-sex lifestyle is incompatible with Christian teaching. Consequently, annual conferences are not allowed to ordain people who practice a same-sex lifestyle, our churches are not allowed to host same-sex weddings, and our clergy are not allowed to officiate same-sex unions.

With that being said, there have been efforts to change the BoD. Every time a vote has been brought to the floor of General Conference to change our theology, doctrine, and practice, the General Conference has voted to uphold the current language of the BoD; however, the vote has been close.

Over time, it has become very clear that there is a deep, irreconcilable theological divide within our denomination. With the continual postponements of General Conference, and with the divide growing, many churches have started utilizing Paragraph 2553 of the BoD which outlines the process for a local church to disaffiliate from the denomination and leave with their property. Our Conference Board of Trustees have absorbed the language of Paragraph 2553 into its disaffiliation policy (utilizing Paragraph 2549), extending the deadline to make a decision to disaffiliate to the end of 2024.

As a result, each local church must decide where it stands and its future within the UMC.

Why doesn't a church that either disagrees with our current doctrine or disagrees with where our denomination is headed leave?

There are several reasons, but the main one is called The Trust Clause. The Trust Clause was written by John Wesley and states that the property and assets of the local church are held "in trust" for the whole denomination. In short, property is held by both the local church and the conference. To leave means to abandon all property and assets. No traditional, centrist, or progressive congregation wants to do that. Disaffiliation is a process, available for a limited period, that would allow us to leave the UMC with minimal loss of assets.

Why is now the time to have the conversation about our future with the UMC?

Our Conference Trustees have graciously extended the opportunity to disaffiliate until 2024. Many believe that our denomination is broken. Certain jurisdictions are in violation of our BoD, and there does not seem to be any accountability in those regions.

This extension provides us with the opportunity to learn more about our denomination as we head toward next year's General Conference (April 23-May 3, 2024).

Three points to consider during General Conference:

1. Polity. Are there any proposals to change the BoD?
2. Accountability. Will those living in direct violation to the BoD be held responsible?
3. Civility. How does our General Conference (and Annual Conference) interact during the meeting?

We have until the summer of 2024 to make a decision on remaining within the United Methodist Church. Please be in prayerful consideration as we move forward.

What is the current state of the South Georgia Annual Conference?

Since our last Annual Conference (June 2023):

- ☐ 274 Churches within our conference have voted to disaffiliate.
- ☐ 212 Churches within our conference remain connected to The United Methodist Church.
- ☐ To cut costs within the conference, we have moved from six district superintendents to three and from six district secretaries to one.
- ☐ Finances have been dramatically reduced from the annual conference budget.

What does “disaffiliate” mean, and what is required?

For the full list of requirements, please visit this website:

<https://www.sgaumc.org/disaffiliation>. Disaffiliation is allowed through Paragraph 2553 of the BoD. Our Conference Trustees have adopted a similar disaffiliation policy through Paragraph 2549 of the BoD. This is the process by which a local church may close its doors as a United Methodist Church and reinstitute as a new entity.

The South Georgia Annual Conference has certain requirements for disaffiliation, and it also requires a specific timeline be followed.

- ☐ Church Council/Board appoints a Discernment Team. (The Ridge took this step in Fall 2023.)
- ☐ Church Council/Board hears report from the Discernment Team and votes on whether to consider disaffiliation from the UMC.
- ☐ If the Council/Board votes to consider disaffiliation, it then notifies the District Superintendent (DS) of this desire.
- ☐ The DS holds an informal meeting at a later date with Council/Board.
- ☐ The DS must convene a Church Conference within 120 days of being notified and no later than July 31st 2024 to vote on disaffiliation via a written ballot. Only members are allowed to vote. Approval requires 2/3 majority.
- ☐ Conference Trustees approve and then annual conference approves.
- ☐ The disaffiliating church has 30 days to pay required fees for disaffiliation (we will explain the cost of fees in the coming months).

What options are in front of us?

The Ridge must make our choice independently. Our choice is not and should not be reliant on what other United Methodist churches do or don't do. Our current bishop has repeatedly stated that his desire is to help each church end up where it wants to be.

1. If The Ridge wants to remain in the UMC and abide by whatever changes are made to the BoD, then no action is required.
2. If The Ridge wants to disaffiliate during 2024's special Annual Conference (August 17), the church leadership must notify the DS no later than July 15, 2024, of a desire to hold a Church Conference that would allow members to vote. The exact date of this vote will be scheduled with the DS (based on her availability, as she has to be present for the vote) and the date will be communicated to the church body as soon as it is known. Considering the deadlines we have been given, we anticipate any vote would occur mid-summer.

What options are in front of us if we vote to disaffiliate?

It is tempting to jump to this question, but it is important to remember that the answer to this question should not determine how you answer the main question: Does our church need to stay in the UMC or not? If we choose to disaffiliate from the UMC, there are several options in front of us:

1. Become an independent church.
2. Join an existing Wesleyan denomination.
3. Join the new denomination that has adopted the current BoD (Global Methodist Church).

There are pros and cons to each option. The Discernment Team is doing their research and will communicate their findings to the church body in the coming months.

What does Pastor Jimmy think?

Pastor Jimmy affirms the Book of Discipline as it stands now.

Framework to Simplify Decision Making

Presented by team member Bill Simril

The decision to leave or remain within the UMC is not easy. Assuming everyone has all the latest facts, boiling the decision down to "leave or stay" is very complex. Each member will have one vote and identifying the factors surrounding that vote can be difficult.

In day-to-day life, when we are confronted with options, we all identify the criteria that impacts our decision. For example, when shopping for a new car we may look at certain things to help us decide like price, payment terms, color, features, reliability, resale, safety, etc.

The same principle can also apply in determining whether to leave or stay in the UMC. To some extent, we have all thought about the decision before us. However, most of us haven't had the time to really dive into all the details--how it affects our individual families and the overall church family.

The list below is only the beginning of a larger list of factors we all should consciously or subconsciously consider as we ponder the vote:

1. Which option demands accountability of the UMC leadership and upholding the Book of Discipline?
2. Which option allows our local church to decide which missions and local community charities we support?
3. Which option aligns with my personal beliefs & understanding of how the Bible addresses human sexuality?
4. Which option is better (personally defined) for my family?
5. Which option is better (personally defined) for my church family?
6. How does staying/leaving affect Pastor Jimmy and his family?
7. Which option gives us the most input on future pastors?
8. Which option allows The Ridge to retain its assets (land/finances) and decide how to use them in the future?
9. Which option better aligns with how I want the community to perceive our church?
10. Which option affords an important teaching lesson for our children?
11. Which option is least disruptive to the church and programs/events that I currently love?
12. Which option provides a path of long-term sustainability as a local church?

As we journey through this process, we'll share more of these questions with you. Please be in prayer about the upcoming decision. When the time is right, review and answer each question.