

Dear Arkansas Conference Member:

Thank you for your dedication to the United Methodist Church and to the Arkansas Conference. We are writing to prayerfully ask that you do NOT support the disaffiliation agreement for First United Methodist Church, Jonesboro. With the documentation below, we can show that our process was flawed in multiple areas which resulted in a vote that was not based on a fair process nor a heart of peace. In short, our process was clearly not laity led, advocacy was one-sided, and the discernment process was effectively less than the required three months. Stay UMC members were unable to obtain important membership and financial information. We were denied use of all church resources. With these and many other concerns, we believe that your approval would send the message that these concerns are not valid and not relevant to the larger witness of the church. Our long-term hope is to try, once again, to come together with many of those who voted for disaffiliation and form a strong United Methodist congregation in Jonesboro, in thanksgiving to God and to our forebears who have supported our church through generations. We believe that this is possible.



Introduction

Pastors of FUMC Jonesboro began advocating for disaffiliation at least as early as January 2020. Even with a pandemic limiting nearly all church operations, the church's Administrative Board was asked to allow a team of 15 lay leaders of the church to "consider our options."

Following the postponement of the General Conference, our senior pastor wrote to the Leadership Team, "... the Global Methodist Church has announced that it will officially form on May 1 ... while there are a few hurdles we still face, this offers us a clear pathway to depart the UMC. I believe this path will allow us to depart with our property at minimal cost." A similar message was shared with the congregation in the March 8, 2021, church newsletter. Church members were directed to a new page on the FUMC Jonesboro Web site. That page, called "Moving Forward," and a later one called "Disaffiliation" would present the case for leaving the UMC and little about any alternatives. Eventually a link to the Disaffiliation page would dominate the front page of the Web site.

A town hall meeting was held Nov. 14, 2021, and led by Rev. Miles and Chris James, chair of the Leadership Team. At this meeting Rev. Miles said he would not stay as pastor of FUMC Jonesboro unless it disaffiliates from the United Methodist Church and said quick action is necessary while there is a "sympathetic bishop."

What followed was a one-sided discernment process, which allowed members of FUMC Jonesboro who oppose disaffiliation little opportunity to express their views. The use of church facilities, staff and communications was denied. Members of two drug addiction ministries were encouraged to join FUMC shortly before the final vote.

Stay UMC Jonesboro, 361 Southwest Drive, Jonesboro 72401.

While ArUMC leaders expressed sympathy and on occasion advocated for more transparency, little changed to make the process fair before the July 31, 2022, church conference that resulted in a vote for disaffiliation.

The failure of our Arkansas Conference to ensure a fair process is honestly confusing and disheartening and causes many members to question the future of the denomination. If an objective study had been done, followed by a fair discernment process, our group would have accepted the decision.

We have established a web site:

(<https://sites.google.com/view/stayumcjonesboro/introduction>)

There we document the drive toward disaffiliation culminating with the July 31, 2022, vote, which was led by the pastoral staff of FUMC Jonesboro. The facts show why the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church should reject the Disaffiliation Agreement passed by the Board of Trustees of FUMC Jonesboro on Oct. 17, 2022.

According to the terms of the Disaffiliation Agreement signed by FUMC Jonesboro on Oct. 17, Sections 2, 3 and 7 all require certain information to be submitted to the Arkansas Conference by Aug. 30, 2022 (within 30 days from July 31 disaffiliation vote). This did not happen. The last sentence of Section IV(1) of the Disaffiliation Agreement provides “should the Disaffiliating Church fail to satisfy all of its obligations as set forth herein on or before the specified dates, the Disaffiliation Agreement shall be null and void.” Thus, in accordance with Section IV(1), the members of the Arkansas Conference should hold the Disaffiliation Agreement for FUMC Jonesboro to be null and void.

Summary

Following is a point-by-point summary of the unfair, flawed process that led to a vote for disaffiliation on July 31, 2022. For additional details, (link document here)

1. Despite repeated requests, we were never able to obtain or even see a roster of church members.
2. The discernment process was led by a pastor who was determined to lead FUMC Jonesboro into disaffiliation.
3. We were denied essential use of any FUMC Jonesboro resources.
4. Accurate and complete financial information was difficult to obtain and was only minimally provided after insistence by the Bishop.
5. At the June 26 Administrative Board meeting, we asked that a deadline be set for new membership additions as we did not understand why anyone would want to join a church that was in the process of disaffiliating unless it was to sway the vote. We also question the use of standard UMC vows by a pastor committed to disaffiliation. Associate Pastor Casey Turner, Susan Miles and women’s mission leader Jennifer Tarwater were actively recruiting and baptizing new members from our church’s addiction ministry recovery groups until the date of the vote. Church records indicate that 132 professing members were added to the roster between April and the end of July.

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6. We asked that objective, balanced information be provided to youth groups and mission groups. That was not done.
7. An insufficient number of ballots were provided for the number of professing members present at the church conference, and some left out of frustration.
8. Leaders of the disaffiliation effort repeatedly and inaccurately made claims that the church's decision would be whether to leave the United Methodist Church AND join the Global Methodist Church, which exists in name only. The vote was simply for or against disaffiliation.
9. The first straw vote, held during a churchwide meeting in December 2021, had a flawed ballot, designed to produce a one-sided vote. None of our three ballots had the same wording, and only the third and final ballot stated the motion.

Conclusion

These and other points, all of which are documented, represent a deeply flawed process that was manipulated to produce the end result — disaffiliating from the United Methodist Church.

Indeed, the process was compressed to minimize opposition. After the acknowledgment of the church's March 27 letter of intent to disaffiliate, no notice was given to the church's congregation of the action until May 5 — six weeks later. Thus, the required minimum 3-month discernment period was in effect, cut significantly short.

A petition, signed by more than 300 church members, to postpone the vote at least until after Labor Day to allow for better attendance by professing members was summarily dismissed by the church's Administrative Board. Bishop Mueller declined to intervene.

Stay UMC members also contacted District Superintendent Fleming and Bishop Mueller numerous times asking for help in obtaining information, rectifying process mis-steps, pleading for a fair chance to be heard and citing ongoing examples of pastor-led initiatives. These pleas resulted in no significant changes to the process. A simple postponement would have given the Arkansas UMC administration time to correct many errors in the process without using the FUMC Jonesboro as a "guinea pig."

Even with the one-sided campaign for disaffiliation, the final vote on July 31 showed a sharp division within the congregation. The vote was 944 to 412; a swing of just 41 votes would have changed the outcome.

Lastly, the motion presented for disaffiliation in the church's March 27, 2022, letter does not meet the criteria of paragraph 2553 in the Book of Discipline as reasons of conscience regarding a change related to human sexuality in the Arkansas Conference. This is a major fault, which is explained in our attorney's Aug. 26, 2022, letter to Bishop Mueller, which is contained in the Post-election Timeline on our Web site. Therefore, the request from FUMC Jonesboro to enter the discernment process should not have been certified.

The ends should never justify the means in society, let alone within a church family. Love and concern for others were sadly lacking in this entire process. For the reasons set forth herein, we respectfully request that members of the Arkansas Conference vote against ratification of FUMC Jonesboro's disaffiliation request.