

Chris,

One of the more interesting questions to be voted on at the 2024 United Methodist Church, General Conference, is the request for “full communion” with the Episcopal Church. Discussions between both the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church began in 2012 and moved forward to a formal relationship that was to be voted on at the 2020 General Conference. In a [video recorded in 2019](#), United Methodist Bishop Gregory V. Palmer (co-chair of the dialogue committee and leader of the West Ohio Conference) chatted with the Episcopal Church’s presiding bishop, Michael Curry, about the relationship between the two denominations.

The Rev. Margaret Rose, deputy for ecumenical and interreligious relations for The Episcopal Church, [told Episcopal News Service](#) that any plan for full communion would be with the portion of The United Methodist Church that is LGBTQ-affirming. For now, she sees The Episcopal Church’s resolution submitted to this summer’s General Convention as an assurance to those United Methodists “that we want to continue in the struggle for justice with you.”

What is full communion of the denominations?

Full communion means each church acknowledges the other as a partner in the Christian faith, recognizes the validity of each other’s baptism and Eucharist, and commits to work together in ministry. Both churches recognize one another as members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in which Baptism, membership and ordinations are recognized as complete in Christ. Both churches commit to common witness, mission, worship, and service. Members may freely receive the Eucharist in one another’s communions. Members pledge to be mutually enriched by one another’s traditions. Full communion means autonomy, with distinct churches, and interchangeability of ordained ministers.

Such an agreement also means Episcopalians and United Methodists can share clergy. The United Methodist Church already has full-communication agreements with the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#), the [Uniting Church in Sweden](#), five historically Black [Pan-Methodist denominations](#) and [the](#)

[Moravian Church in North America](#). Like United Methodists, Episcopalians already have full communion with the Lutherans and Moravians.

Why would the UMC and Episcopal Church want full communion?

The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church have similar problems but have the means to address the same through their current respective positions. The Episcopal Church has very few members, but a vast number of financial resources that can help a financially struggling denomination. And the United Methodist Church is struggling mightily on the financial front but has many more members than the Episcopal Church. Therefore, the initial “full communion” to the eventual merger of the denominations makes sense. All me to explain.

According to a [recent report](#), the Episcopal Church currently has about 373,000 thousand people who worship at a denominational church each Sunday. This is about a 50% reduction in attendance in the past decade, as stated by the Episcopal Church in its yearly reports. However, the Episcopal Church has over \$400 million in trust assets, \$11 billion in clergy retirement funds and another \$4.5 bill in [endowments](#) generating income to sustain the denomination. Additionally, the Episcopal Church controls 14 acres in lower Manhattan adjacent to Trinity Church worth an estimated [\\$6 billion dollars](#). According to the [New York Times](#), in 2017, this portfolio of land generated \$331 million in profit for the Episcopal Church.

Contrasting the Episcopal Church, with the United Methodist Church, we see a remarkable disparity of attendance and income. While the United Methodist Church claims it has nearly [six million members](#) in the United States as of 2021 the actual attenders in 2021 are 1,361,181 according to data from [UM Data](#). However, the United Methodist Church is not a legal entity and has no assets. The pension assets are with a separate legal entity called Wespath. The Annual Conference’s themselves have very little in terms of assets, but claims a “trust” in the real property of local churches. Many states have already concluded that the “trust” claimed by the Annual Conference is not legally enforceable and therefore, is not an asset that can be claimed by the Annual Conference.

It therefore makes sense to eventually merge the two denominations into one so that there will be one financially stable denomination – thanks to the legacy of the Episcopal Church – and another with people who may or may not attend – thanks to the remnants of the United Methodist Church.

How similar is worship?

Episcopalians and United Methodists are catholic, reformed, and evangelical. They are offspring of the 18th century Church of England that responded differently to the missionary environment of the United States' early years. They share the same Scriptures, the same creeds, an episcopate, and commitments to the Christian life of holiness and *diakonia*. [The Book of Common Prayer](#) structures Episcopal worship. The Eucharist is the principal act of Sunday worship in the Episcopal Church. For United Methodists, the [Book of Worship](#) is a liturgical guide.

How does governance work in each denomination?

In terms of [governance](#), the Episcopal Church is expressed through four orders of ministry: laity, deacons, priests, and bishops. The United Methodist Church has three orders of ministry: laity, deacons, and elders, with Bishops as consecrated leaders. For United Methodists, the local church is part of an Annual Conference, which may be part of a state or comprising several states. Similarly, for Episcopalians, the diocese is the primary body, and each parish finds its place within the diocese. Each annual conference and each diocese are led by a bishop. The highest legislative authority for United Methodists is the General Conference, with clergy and lay delegates who meet every four years. The highest legislative authority for Episcopalians is the General Convention, which meets every three years, and is composed of two houses, deputies (clergy and laity) and bishops. In local congregations of both churches, there is a shared ministry between ordained and lay leaders.

Is there any reason to be concerned with an eventual merger?

There is one major issue that local Methodist Church's' need to be aware of – the hierarchal structure of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church enacted the “Dennis Cannon,” in the early 1980's to address the issue of property ownership of local churches in the Episcopal Church. In some states,

the Dennis Cannon is enforceable, precluding local churches from leaving the denomination and retaining their property. In other states, the Dennis Cannon is either not enforceable or has not been tested yet. Therefore, there is a significant risk of a local church losing its property once it become part of the Episcopal Church.

When the merger of the two denominations occurs, the local churches who are thinking of leaving needs to take significant steps to preserve ownership of their property so that if it later wishes to leave the merged entity, it can retain the same without the risk of losing it in litigation.

Questions?

If you have any additional questions concerning this issue, please feel free to reach out to our firm at (313) 859-6000 or email me at ddalton@daltontomich.com to discuss this issue in greater detail.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Dan

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