



Minnesota Annual Conference
of the United Methodist Church
Southern Prairie District

Our Mission

Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Our Vision

Grow in Love of God and Neighbor
Reach New People
Heal a Broken World

Expression of Our Vision as Lived Out Values

Rooted in Jesus
Grounded in Wesleyan Theology
Inclusive of All Persons
Engaged in the Work of Justice and Reconciliation

August 23, 2022

To the people called United Methodists in the Southern Prairie District,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Christ Jesus!

In the last six weeks, I have noticed the temperature rise in the district concerning denominational schism. The cybersphere is full of many people from other annual conferences speaking into our denominational impasse with increased fervor. I try to stay connected to what is being said, and I have identified what I believe are “myths” that have created a false sense of urgency at least for the Minnesota United Methodist Churches. I hope you might find this document helpful.

1. **MYTH: THE UMC IS SPLITTING!** A denominational split is a specific negotiated plan to separate an entire denomination. This has not occurred. What has happened is a new denomination (Global Methodist Church) has formed as of May 2022 and some congregations in the worldwide United Methodist Church are choosing to leave the UMC and join that new denomination.
2. **MYTH: WE MUST LEAVE NOW!** News sources from other conferences and caucus groups have increased the sense of urgency that if you don’t disaffiliate this year, you will miss the most advantageous window. In fact, it’s hard to predict what window will be most opportune for churches considering disaffiliation, since the General Conference has not met and will not meet until 2024. It could be voting to leave now will be a greater burden than if you leave later. We simply don’t know. What we do know is that our Minnesota Annual Conference Trustees have stated that they are committed to the most gracious exit for disaffiliating churches that the discipline allows and have shown this posture towards the three churches that disaffiliated in 2022.
3. **MYTH: EVERY CHURCH WILL HAVE TO VOTE TO CHOOSE TO STAY OR LEAVE!** Your congregation is United Methodist. Only those churches considering disaffiliating would have to vote to do so.
4. **MYTH: THE ONGOING UMC DOESN’T HAVE ROOM FOR A CONSERVATIVE OR TRADITIONAL EXPRESSION OF THE FAITH.** To my knowledge in the history of the UMC, no member, no clergy, or church has ever been asked to leave the UMC because they held to a more traditional or conservative viewpoint. One of the four values of the Minnesota Conference is “inclusive of all.” All means all! And our own Wesleyan understanding of sanctification is grounded in a “social holiness” that demands viewpoints different than our own. The current cabinet and bishop are committed to making space for all.
5. **MYTH: THE HISTORIC TENETS OF THE FAITH ARE AT STAKE!** There are no intentions, plans, or legislation coming to General Conference to move the United Methodist Church away from the doctrines laid out in the Apostle’s Creed or in our Doctrinal Standards as found in the Book of Discipline Paragraph 104. In fact, there are very restrictive rules making it extremely difficult to change the United Methodist doctrinal standards which include the historic doctrines of the

Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren articles and confessions of faith. Are there people in service to the denomination who don't ascribe fully to these doctrines? Of course, and this is the case in all denominations – progressive or conservative. We believe it best to stand on the historic tenets of the faith as the launching pad for theology and ministry. Unlike other denominations, our understanding of grace demands that we allow freedom of thought to explore the new things the Spirit of God may be doing. And as Steven Guthrie writes; "We remember that while we may hold doctrines, our doctrines don't hold God—neither controlling him nor containing all there is of him." Pastors and churches that hold more closely to traditional theologies built from these historic tenets are welcomed and needed.

6. **MYTH: WE CAN'T GET ANSWERS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF DISAFFILIATION!** If your church is considering disaffiliating from the UMC, you should inform your DS. They can provide information concerning the process which has been established by the Conference Board of Trustees. If you hope to disaffiliate in this conference year, you should inform your DS prior to October 1, so that your congregation has enough time to consider the matter and walk through the process prior to next year's annual conference. For congregations that have this kind of clarity, we want to help them as graciously as possible so they can move on and get about the work of the gospel. What we cannot provide are answers regarding the GMC as we do not serve that denomination.
7. **MYTH: THE UMC DOESN'T VALUE SCRIPTURE!** Our doctrinal standards regarding the Bible state: 1) the Bible contains everything necessary and sufficient for salvation; 2) the Bible is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice; and 3) Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation. The United Methodist Church believes that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine, and we interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. (Book of Discipline paragraphs 104 & 105). Yes, there are conservatives and progressives alike who do ignore, misinterpret, and misappropriate the Bible. However, in my experience, most people's positions on human sexuality are formed precisely because they value scripture.
8. **MYTH: OUR CLERGY WILL BE COMPELLED TO PERFORM MARRIAGES THAT VIOLATE THEIR CONSCIENCE!** The following is an excerpt from a recent cabinet publication: We understand and respect that Minnesota United Methodist clergy who have engaged in prayerful discernment have differing views on officiating marriage ceremonies for LGBTQIA+ couples. No clergy will be expected or compelled to officiate marriage ceremonies that their conscience does not allow. Clergy have always been able to decline officiating marriages for any number of reasons, and clergy will be able to continue to exercise that discretion.
9. **MYTH: WE WILL BE COMPELLED TO RECEIVE A CLERGY APPOINTMENT THAT ISN'T A FIT FOR US!** Appointment decisions are first and foremost based on a match of leadership characteristics and missional fit. Consideration is given for the unique situations of clergy and the context for congregations to ensure a strong bond between pastor and people. The cabinet works tirelessly to ensure the healthiest of alignments of clergy with churches.
10. **MYTH: MY CONGREGATION IS OF ONE MIND ON THIS!** While it is often the case that one position is loudest, I've yet to be in a church where multiple positions aren't held regarding human sexuality and disaffiliation from the UMC. Therefore, it's imperative to do the hard work of providing brave spaces with healthy ground rules so that important discernment can happen. I've yet to be in a

church that isn't capable of this. Your congregation is not of one mind and yet more able and ready than you think to talk about this.

11. MYTH: MOVING TO ANOTHER DENOMINATION WILL SOLVE ALL OUR PROBLEMS AS A LOCAL CHURCH! The good news is that regardless of your denomination your local church is completely free to be a faithful, faith-filled, life-giving expression of the gospel in your context. The bad news, if you are not these things already, a denominational switch will not help you. If you have difficulty with things like establishing Sunday School, affording, or receiving an appointed pastor, or reaching young families – this will continue regardless of denomination. You are completely free now to offer Christ in relevant ways to the world who desperately needs him. I can't think of a bishop, DS, or pastor that would stop you.

A few final notes:

1. The UMC has been and will likely remain a theologically diverse worldwide Christian denomination on a mission to make disciples for Jesus for the transformation of the world.
2. The Minnesota Annual Conference has developed and approved the vision and values it seeks to live by. You can find them here: <https://www.minnesotaumc.org/about>
3. The Charles Wesley hymn "And Are We Yet Alive" was used by his brother John to begin annual society meetings. The third verse, regarding conflicts and fears, can seem especially poignant right now, but we cannot linger there. No, the richness of the Wesley hymns are found in the progression towards the ultimate destination of not salvation only in part, or only for heaven, but "uttermost salvation" available to you in me today. I invite you to read the six stanzas and then I invite your church to occupy itself in nothing less than verse six.

*1 And are we yet alive,
and see each other's face?
Glory and thanks to Jesus give
for his almighty grace!*

*3 What troubles have we seen,
what mighty conflicts past,
fightings without, and fears within,
since we assembled last!*

*5 Then let us make our boast
of his redeeming power,
which saves us to the uttermost,
till we can sin no more.*

*2 Preserved by power divine
to full salvation here,
again in Jesus' praise we join,
and in his sight appear.*

*4 Yet out of all the Lord
hath brought us by his love;
and still he doth his help afford,
and hides our life above.*

*6 Let us take up the cross
till we the crown obtain,
and gladly reckon all things loss
so we may Jesus gain.*

Be blessed,



Rev. Fred Vanderwerf

(Some of these myths were gleaned from a similar document composed by Dakota's superintendent Kris Mutzenberger.)

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