



Richmond First United Methodist Church

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...growing disciples who make a difference

To our church family at Richmond First United Methodist Church,

Many of you have heard that at a special called session of the Kentucky Annual Conference in December of 2022, 57 churches received permission to disaffiliate from the United Methodist. You may also be aware that the coming session of the Annual Conference will process further disaffiliations. We don't know yet exactly what that number might be. Some of you almost certainly have family or friends, either here in Kentucky, or elsewhere, who attend churches that have already voted to disaffiliate. This news begs a few questions:

1. What is "disaffiliation," anyway?
2. Why are so many churches making this decision right now?
3. What is Richmond First United Methodist Church's course of action in the face of all of this?

This letter is an attempt to communicate the "short" answer to these questions. Please rest assured that we have more detailed answers for those that need them, and that we will continue to discern and inform together over the months ahead in an open, transparent forum.

"Disaffiliation" is the word that the 1997 United Methodist Discipline chose to use to refer to a church's withdrawal from the United Methodist denomination under a newly penned Paragraph 2553. Prior to this paragraph's inclusion in the Discipline, of course, a United Methodist congregation could dissolve itself, or even choose to no longer be United Methodist. However, the property and assets of any church that decided to do this would revert to the Annual Conference. In short, we could leave any time, but we would have to leave our buildings and so forth behind when we went.

Paragraph 2553 was written to allow churches to disaffiliate *without surrendering their property*. However, the paragraph only comes into play in two very specific cases:

1. A church can disaffiliate because of conscientious objections to changes in the 1997 Discipline pertaining to the ordination of homosexuals, or changes in the 1997 Discipline pertaining to same sex marriages.
2. A church can disaffiliate because of actions or inactions of their Annual Conference pertaining to either the ordination of homosexuals or the celebration of same sex marriages.

In those two cases, a church could leave the denomination without surrendering their property, as long as they satisfied any current debt that they had with their annual conference.

So why are so many churches disaffiliating right now?

When the General Conference of our denomination put Paragraph 2553 in the Discipline, they were operating under the assumption that the General Conference would be meeting again in 2020 to finalize any changes to the Discipline and to oversee the transitions that might need to result. With that in mind, they placed a time limit on Paragraph 2553 that will expire in December of 2023.

We all know that the Covid pandemic struck in March of 2020 and totally disrupted *everything*. Consequently, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church *has not met since Paragraph 2553 entered our Discipline*. That group is scheduled to meet in 2024.

Many churches have already decided that they wish to disaffiliate and want to complete this process before Paragraph 2553 expires.

So what about Richmond First United Methodist Church?

The very short answer is this: the Administrative Council of Richmond First United Methodist Church unanimously agreed not to take action concerning affiliation or disaffiliation until the 2024 Annual Conference.

Here was the team's process and thinking.

Conversation around this decision resumed in December of 2022. The team discussed together of the steps in the process and the overall conversations around disaffiliation. At our request, Dr. Iosmar Alvarez, our Lexington District Superintendent met with the Administrative Council in January to answer questions about the process, and to share any insights he might have about likely actions that could take place when General Conference convenes in 2024.

Our Administrative Council took no action on the evening that the District Superintendent met with us. In their regular meeting on January 23, they gathered with the conversation about affiliation and disaffiliation front and center. The Administrative Council voted unanimously that it is best for our church to defer any decisions about possible affiliation or disaffiliation until after General Conference meets in 2024. As of today, we don't even know what the denomination will claim as their official stance on the ordination and/or marriage of homosexual persons. The eventual work of discernment will be difficult enough once we know what our actual *choices* are. We are comfortable with the small risk that Paragraph 2553 (or something much like it) could possibly disappear in 2024.

We express our confidence in those that make up our General Conference, and in the leadership of our Annual Conference. We do not believe our church will be trapped in a situation that would force us to act against our conscience.

In the meantime, the Administrative Council commits to an ongoing plan for discernment and communication. It may be worth reminding ourselves that we began this process of discernment in March of 2019. We will almost certainly begin the process anew, but if you are interested in those previous conversations, you can now find them on our webpage. There's a tab at the top of the page labelled "Resources."

Please join us in prayer as we seek God's will together around this important decision in the life of our church.

Yours in Christ,

Rev Bruce Nettleton, pastor

Jon Clevenger, Chairperson of the Administrative Council