

DATE: March 30, 2023

SUBJECT: Final Report from the “Listening and Learning” Task Force

TO: Barbara Helms, Chair of the AUMC Administrative Board
Dr. Cory Smith, AUMC Senior Pastor
Rev. Charles Cummings, AUMC Associate Pastor
Rev. Kelli Hitchman-Craig, AUMC. Associate Pastor

COPY TO: Members of the Listening and Learning Task Force

The purpose of this report is to comply with the requirements of a motion passed at the meeting of the AUMC Administrative Board Meeting held on February 20, 2023. That motion directed the Listening and Learning Task Force to conduct a church-wide informational meeting no later than March 22, 2023, and subsequently report the results to the Administrative Board within 7 days. The purpose of the meeting was to share accurate information regarding what is happening currently in the Alabama – West Florida Conference of the UMC and to clear up confusion and clarify misunderstanding people have about “What Does It Mean to Disaffiliate” and “How Do United Methodists Make Decisions?”

Church-wide information meetings were held on Monday, March 20, 2023, and Tuesday, March 21, 2023, with a total of approximately 700 people attending the two sessions. During the meeting members of the Task Force distributed a survey that requested members to address the following: “After hearing the information presented, would you like for AUMC to (1) Enter the formal Discernment process to consider Disaffiliation or (2) Stay a United Methodist Church? The Survey also provided an opportunity for members of the congregation to provide additional comments or questions.

The Task Force received 625 Survey responses from verified members of the AUMC congregation. Of the surveys received, 98% of the respondents found the information provided helpful. The following are the results from the Survey as well as a comparison with AUMC membership totals, using 3300 as the number estimated for current membership. Additionally, the Task Force has compiled a summary of Comments that were submitted on the Surveys. These comments are also attached for your consideration.

	Summary based on Number of completed questionnaires		Summary based on Membership Totals Using 3300 as Estimated AUMC Membership	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Discern	380	60.8%	380	11.52%
Stay	225	36.0%	225	6.82%
Undecided	20	3.2%	20	0.61%
Total	625	100%	625	18.94%

Prior to the Informational Meeting, the Task Force established an email address where AUMC members could submit questions pertaining to the topic of Disaffiliation and Remaining a United Methodist Church. Almost 200 questions were submitted, and a number of the questions were addressed at the Informational Meeting. The Task Force plans to continue to answer questions and discover information that will be helpful to church members as we continue to examine issues related to Disaffiliation and Staying Connected to the United Methodist Church. This task will be completed no later than April 3, 2023.

The Task Force believes that it has completed its obligations with the submission of this report and the attachments and requests that this information be provided to all members of the AUMC Administrative Board for their deliberations. We suggest that consideration be given to posting this information to the AUMC website, as appropriate. Additionally, all of the surveys, which are anonymous, have been retained for review by the Administrative Board, if required.

In conclusion, as a result of feedback received in the Surveys and the strong emotions that are being expressed throughout the AUMC congregation, the Task Force suggests that urgent consideration be given to calling a “Special Session” of the Administrative Board to consider whether or not to proceed with a formal “Discernment” period.

Respectfully submitted by all Members of the Listening and Learning Task Force

Attachments

**Attendees Who Found the Informational Meeting Helpful and Provided
Additional Comments – Updated 3-29-23**

COMMENT NUMBER	COMMENT
1.	UMC denominational structure.
2.	Membership and financial decline numbers; especially the children and youth ministries; please consider the number of active families who have found other church homes over the last 5 years because of the leadership at AUMC.
3.	Want a rebuttal of the misinformation told by the speaker of the “Disaffiliation Presentation.”
4.	Healing will only come through vote when all voices are heard, and everyone has the opportunity to share.
5.	We can’t rely on people joining from local churches who have disaffiliated. The number we gain would not replace the number we have lost or will leave.
6.	Want to enter. discernment but don’t yet know how I will vote if this gets to a vote.
7.	Helpful to have both sides present; unfair that the Stay UMC side was allowed to speak longer.
8.	There would be less fear of disaffiliation if this task force could present how we will be able to maintain our outreach, programs, and ministries despite disaffiliation.
9.	We will remain divided, and chaos will continue unless the Administrative Board allows formal “discernment.” We need more information!
10.	Scripture is God-breathed and not to be changed; Stay true to the Bible; the statement about the Bible translations being interpretable is scary; compromising God’s Word is NOT an option; the Holy Bible must be the focus and our guide to living this life; where does the authority exist that gives one the authority to change the contents of the Holy Bible to satisfy the desires and thoughts of sinners, which we all are? We now understand that the current UMC allows interpretation of Scripture.
11.	Connectionism—Christmas Covenant is dividing the Book of Discipline to fit what each region needs to hear.
12.	Understand the Mosaic Laws- 631 laws were a covenant between Israel and God.
13.	The Wesley Foundation is not a part of AUMC.
14.	Birmingham Southern is in great financial trouble for misuse of Federal financial aid.
15.	Information on how UMC is not disciplining rogue pastors.
16.	Changes in the Lord’s Prayer.
17.	History of elections at conference.
18.	Reading of the Book of Discipline.
19.	Disregard for the Book of Discipline and what is condoned.
20.	Stay UMC speakers implied that members leaving the UMC would be leaving FAITH. Leaving the UMC has no impact on belief in the Trinity, passion for serving, nor does it prohibit the membership from maintaining “lost connections.”
21.	Jesus loves us all, but He also disciplines us when we disobey. We must be held accountable for disobedience.
22.	Disaffiliation is not about who may or may not choose to attend our church. All who want to hear the Word of God from the Bible can come and feel welcome.

23.	The pastors and church staff have only reached out to our family once in the past 3 years about why we have not been attending lately, we are long-time members.
24.	Grace was the most important message heard.
25.	We are a college town. We need a college ministry.
26.	Aggressive attitude- seemed angry- from those wanting to "Stay UMC."
27.	The issue is not about love, missions, programs- we'll still be the same if we disaffiliate, but we'll be following Scripture and the Book of Discipline; we've already seen changes of Scripture read and pronouns used that dilute the meaning of Scripture.
28.	The process, the discipline, of democratic decision is how all other Methodist churches are deliberating and the perception of manipulation/thwarted procedures is eroding the congregation's trust in our leadership and governance.
29.	Disagree with the statement, "It is illegal to disaffiliate under para. 2553; the timeline of 2553.
30.	The point was made that our church was founded alongside our nation. Our nation was founded on the foundation that everyone gets a vote, not going into discernment takes away that vote from all members of AUMC.
31.	Starting the discernment process does not mean that the congregation will vote to disaffiliate. Please let us vote.
32.	We need to enter Discernment and vote NOW and not wait; we're delaying the inevitable.
33.	A committee should not decide whether or not we vote.
34.	Senior pastor should have been up front about being a leader in the "Stay UMC" group. Our pastor has not remained neutral in this matter, but has worked to stand in the way of Discernment and a vote to disaffiliate.
35.	If we don't get to vote, people will leave.
36.	Our decline should be an indication it's time to stop stalling and support the teachings of the Bible.
37.	Decisions are being made without any news to or requests for feedback from the membership; very little "listening" from the task force.
38.	Deeply disappointed that we have been so slow to move into a period of discernment.
39.	Only those afraid of truth would deny the church the opportunity to learn more and make informed decisions.
40.	Concern of newly added members voting if we move toward disaffiliation when they haven't been a part of AUMC and moving membership only due to current situation among denomination.
41.	We need several future meetings through a discernment process because there is still so much information to share and questions to answer.
42.	AUMC has been fruitful and loving and giving a lot longer than it has been a UMC church. It thrived before being UMC and will thrive after.
43.	The uncertainty and lack of strong leadership in AUMC has done great harm to our congregation. We need more transparency. We need to move forward and be allowed to go into discernment.
44.	Myth Busters did not reflect the truth.
45.	A vote for NO to discernment will NOT put division behind us but will exacerbate the division.
46.	Because this is such a divisive issue in our church and the bigger UMC, we DESERVE to have a vote.

47.	After several personal meetings with the Senior Pastor last summer and fall, he promised several times to have this 3/20 meeting immediately but never did.
48.	The only way to make matters worse is to NOT RECOMMEND moving forward with discernment in the spirit that existed in the meeting on 3/20.
49.	Even liberal and progressive people strongly support freedom of speech and the right to vote which is the foundation of our democracy.
50.	George Mathison taught us for 26 years how to love people and serve God. I have never heard or seen condemnation or unloving treatment of gay people at AUMC.
51.	If we want to help improve the UMC, we must continue to be a part of it, leaving is not the answer.
52.	We have no legal basis to disaffiliate.
53.	“Stay UMC” did not need to add the “2553” comment.
54.	Want percentages on how many people have left our church because of the human sexuality issue and leadership- as opposed to percentages that left because of COVID and our doors were closed longer than other churches.
55.	Biblical scholarship requires interpretation in context, which does not diminish its authority.
56.	The problems in our church come from the rapid number of nondenominational churches that have come to our area.
57.	We should be concerned about the members who have not returned to AUMC since the pandemic.
58.	Myth Busters did a great job.
59.	Love being a “Big Tent” church.
60.	Rather than look at pre-COVID numbers for comparisons of attendance, budget, look at what we are now doing.
61.	Too many questions remain regarding the choices for future affiliations, the beliefs of the GMC, how an independent church would be run.
62.	Seems like a lot of pertinent data was intentionally omitted, for and against need to be expanded.
63.	Information on the 3 resolutions that were passed in November.
64.	Current state of the church is alarming.
65.	Need to move forward immediately, have an Administrative Board meeting in April.
66.	It is evident that moral and ceremonial issues are being misunderstood and the New Testament is being ignored.
67.	There is way too much bureaucracy in the UMC.
68.	If sin is not sin, then we don’t need a Savior, if we don’t need a Savior, then we are but a social club.
69.	If the Book of Discipline is changed as predicted in ’24, that is unacceptable.
70.	After hearing the Stay UMC talks, I’m certain we should enter discernment and disaffiliate.
71.	Need to keep youth and college ministries and families.
72.	Financial information- 94% of the offering stays here.
73.	We should wait to see what changes are made at General Conference 2024 and then prayerfully revisit this topic.
74.	Even though I’m a Stay UMC vote, discernment might be the only way for the church to have honest, unbiased conversations about what is happening in the UMC- we need to hear clear, unbiased information.

75.	I have been given enough information to make the best decision for our church. Before this I truly was not sure. Now I am. The discernment process will not bring our church together as one. It will further divide our church! I believe in staying United Methodist. I agree with focusing on compromise rather than conflict. A split in our church will not fix our problems of enrollment and funding. Our church and United Methodists have always reached out to others and shown love to all God's people. As a former Southern Baptist, I believe this church has always held strongly to what scripture says. If we want to help improve the UMC, we must continue to be a part of it. Leaving is not the answer. I totally support our church and believe our church is needed to keep our denomination on the right path.
76.	Some speakers appeared to push leaving UMC with a personal bent instead of factual basis. Has the UMC ever stopped Auburn UMC from "choosing the destiny" regarding our buildings/property?
77.	The influence that the "stay United Methodist Church" group had on the congregation was helpful.
78.	Amazing job with the Myth Busters slides.
79.	We have heard about bishops who have not followed the BOD with regard to human sexuality. Why has no one addressed that clergy and bishops have broken vows they made to the UMC to from Global Methodist church? One bishop was working and being paid by the UMC while writing the preliminary BOD for the GMC. If these bishops and clergy break their vows in one place, why would they not do it again when perceived greener pastures are found? A staff member shared with the recent Embark class that there are no original texts of the Bible. Everything we read is a human interpretation. When the disaffiliation committee shares that the UMC is no longer preaching biblical authority, why are they not giving this fact as contextual information on spiritual authority?
80.	Having a vote will cause a mass exodus by the losing side. We might be "divided church" now, but we will truly be divided into two churches. Even in Alabama, the vast majority of people under 35 are in favor of same-sex marriage. If we are to leave because we are against same-sex marriage, I have no idea where new members will come from. (Pew Research) How did John Wesley go against scripture by becoming a staunch abolitionist? How are Wesleyans to use reason when it comes to scripture?
81.	Disaffiliating presentation did not help people make a decision, but only tried to get us to disaffiliate. It did not take in the statistics what we have experienced a pandemic. We should not be concerned about not growing during that time. We also should be concerned about those members that have not returned.
82.	I still do not understand why we would need to disaffiliate for those that do not support LGQT persons to be able to practice their faith. Was it not misleading / less than truthful to cite 2020 statistics regarding church attendance, finances, etc. (in the middle of Covid) compared to pre-Covid?
83.	I am concerned about the things we give up if we disaffiliate (missions, outreach, and relationship with UMVIM and UMCOR).
84.	I found it very "un-churchlike" for members to wear buttons and write VOTE NO or Answer No.
85.	If you have not read the bible in Greek or Hebrew, then you have read a changed version of the bible that has been translated and affected by modern interpretation. I thought the only reason to disaffiliate was in response to the issue of homosexuality, but it

	appears that the motion to disaffiliate is tied to financial reasons and therefore holds no weight in the BoD. The Leave UMC presentation's evidence rested in monetary reasons, the Stay UMC quoted Wesley and scripture. If the church is a people, then why do those who choose to disaffiliate care so much about the property?
86.	I do not appreciate our BOD being described as a book of rules. It is so much more than that. Despite one church using a revised version of the Lord's Prayer to minister to those harmed by fathers, the UMC isn't trying to change the Lord's Prayer. This version was specific to the context and audience, as Wesley would advise. Thank you for discussing the Wesley Quadrilateral – it seemed the Stay UMC section was educational. I don't appreciate all the mention of donations to the church over the years being about AUMC. My grandparents donated to the UMC; AUMC just happened to be the local structure of that. Thank you to the Stay group that addressed these issues.
87.	The present day negative #s are caused by any number of reasons. The acceptance of the gay community isn't the only reasons for our present-day decline!
88.	The explanation of the "conference" was helpful. We all know what's happened to our membership – people have left for non-denominational churches. Can't we strive to be a community of faith and a beacon on the hill – striving to love the least and the lost. My three adult children who are members but were unable to attend this meeting would all choose to Stay UMC. This church and denomination helped form their faith.
89.	How is the option of owning the property and the "security & independence" any different from the money lenders in the temple? I find it offensive that money & property would drive this given that so many leaders in this disaffiliation movement are developers and real estate professionals.
90.	It's easy – Jesus commanded to love one another. Jesus also said what you do to the least you do to me.
91.	I believe we know the character of a person by their fruits of the Spirit. We learned in disciple the evolving of our knowledge of God and our relationship to him. 150 years ago I'm sure our very fine members used scripture of "slaves obey your masters" to say that slavery was a good thing. We know how evil this was and how much damage this has done to black people up to current day. Let's not make the same mistake by "othering" a group of people. Love is an action word. Love ALL of God's people by letting them serve.
92.	The importance of interpretation, etc. was helpful.
93.	After having been in a church that pulled out, I can truly say it was a very difficult time. Getting ministries was one of the worst situations. After a few years our family made the decision to leave for a different denomination. I am happy to say that after 30 years, I am very happy to be back in the UMC.
94.	If we disaffiliate, do we have the wherewithal to carry on the ministries that we love already. Also, can we be sure that we'll have enough people to be pastors and to head up other things such as teachers, administrators, and programs – missional, inspirational, and other ministries that we are used to having now as a UMC?
95.	It seems that disaffiliation focuses on moving back rather than moving forwards. What are the "traditional" churches that are "booming"? Church of the Highlands, etc. are nondenominational churches and hardly traditional? I keep hearing/reading that the "gay issue" is not the basis of disaffiliation; yet that was the only issue discussed as the major issue, along with owning property.

96.	It was very clear that several members of the task force were “pro-disaffiliation” during the structure and history portion.
97.	I do not want a church controlled by a single person or a few members preaching their personal societal views. I do not want a mega church with its own view of our faith.
98.	Options were presented in a very slanted way toward disaffiliation. Thank you for presenting the view to Stay United Methodist! This presentation and the centrist view align with my thoughts & beliefs. Trust clause – danger of having a few people in control of what happens to our property.
99.	Keep youth and college students, you get families.
100.	Finding out why people want to leave AUMC was helpful. The facts of the situation presented at the start, myth busters, and the fact-based presentation by Stay UMC was helpful. Why don't they just go to another church?
101.	Myth busters was helpful. Better stats or declining membership reasons would be helpful.
102.	The facts of the situation presented at the start, myth busters, and the fact-based presentation by Stay UMC was helpful.
103.	Presumably each 4 years when the BoD is changed, the process is already happening in many places leading to the discussion. So, why is it fair to argue that people disobey the BoD since the last general meeting when it is clear this will be addressed at the next general meeting? And without COVID, would probably already have been addressed. Basing financial/attendance drops on this issue is so biased. Surely COVID is the major factor. Anecdotal information saying “some people” blame this issue is not enough to accept it as fact. “Many believe” it makes sense to buy the church. Why can't you deal in hard numbers than such emotional statements? Why do we not want to be part of the greater effort of having churches throughout the world? Being on our own makes it much harder to see the picture outside our geographically restricted view. I have heard no good reason to own the church.
104.	Biblical scholarship requires interpretation in context, which does not diminish its authority. It is not BoD vs. scripture! Decrease in attendance has nothing to do with the homosexual issue in the BoD. Who is changing the words of the Lord's prayer? (The hymnal contains the different Greek interpretations as found in the different gospels.) Theology, doctrine, beliefs are NOT changing!
105.	Church membership numbers have decreased due to Cornerstone, Highlands, and ACC. What about quality of members? Who are the “Pillars of Faith” that were consulted? College ministry DOES exist – it is called Wesley Foundation. A separate college ministry is redundant. Changing the Lord's prayer ☐ no details to substantiate why or where. What % of US UMC clergy are “rogue”? A trivial amount.
106.	It helped me realized it is all about homosexuality & money. The ownership of property is no concern to me. I was a Baptist for 30 years and have realized the use of property is the same for Methodist and Baptist. This manner of ownership is not that important. If anything it is a safer and more stable ownership at the conference level.
107.	Disaffiliating means we disagree with UMC stance on gay marriage is not accurate to why our folks want to leave. I need to know who is changing the Lord's Prayer? There is no evidence leaving will increase our membership or attendance. This is NOT facts. So we're leaving to own our building?? Myth busters did a great job! Very good info. Love being a “Big Tent Church”.

108.	Hearing about the truth vs. rumors was helpful. All churches were negatively impacted by COVID. Membership is down in most churches. Therefore, giving is down because of it. What's important is the church is not operating in the "red". Last report is finances are fine.
109.	Presentations about disaffiliation was helpful. Our global mission partnerships are very important. A vote of disaffiliation will hurt, not help.
110.	I feel that we should only begin the official discernment process if it is very clear that a 2/3 majority wants to disaffiliate. A vote will cause a split in the church.
111.	Diversity and thoroughness of presentations were helpful.
112.	Dispelling of "rumors" particularly those propagated by the press and social media was helpful.
113.	Discussion with everyone hearing the same information was helpful.
114.	Different viewpoints were helpful.
115.	I regard myself as a rather decent scholar of Methodism. I believe that Methodism is a product of various strains, Anglicanism, the teachings of Wesley, the wider legacy of the Reformation and the 18th century evangelical movement as it was expressed in Britain and on the American frontier. Methodism is a pluralistic church drawing from many different traditions; evangelicalism representing only one of them.
116.	I found out tonight that we have a large group in our church opposed to homosexuality. I don't see or hear of any of the homosexual concerns happening at AUMC. If that is the only concern, you need to search your real concerns regarding this church. If the group is not happy with what the UMC group is doing LEAVE!!!
117.	Hearing both sides and better understanding of myths and misinformation was helpful.
118.	Rather than using pre-COVID numbers for comparison of attendance, budget, etc. look at what we are now doing. Based on our last Admin Board Meeting, we are financially sound and continue to see new members every month, so why the voice of doom and despair?
119.	Has anyone reviewed the Fayetteville, Arkansas United Methodist proposal to split the properties into 3 groups? With all the property that our church currently owns, members feel ownership to the property due to tithing & capital campaigns. I would want the task force and/or administrative board to explore this option.
120.	Things said tonight about being intolerant or not loving LGBTQ are irrelevant. I am personally sad this issue has brought about a division as I cherish many friendships with these people and enjoy worshipping/serving with them. That is not what disaffiliation is about.
121.	The financial presentation was very weak and offered little true analysis of where we stand and what we will or will not be able to maintain given a significant reduction in membership. As a CPA and financial manager sees this situation in numerical black and white. I would appreciate an in depth analysis of what it would really mean rather than a glossed over blanket statement that our position is financially sound. The closing statement admitted that decreased tithes would cause decreased programming and a lower budget. At what point does sustainability no longer become an option?

Name: _____

Please print and write legibly. This portion of the survey will be removed once church membership is verified.



AUMC INFORMATIONAL MEETING SURVEY

Post Survey

Monday, March 20, 2023

Thank you for attending the AUMC Informational Meeting tonight. We would like your feedback. Please answer the following questions. This survey will be used by the Listening and Learning Task Force and the overall results of the survey will be shared with our church through the Administrative Board. We must have your name to verify your membership at AUMC. We will collect these surveys at the end of the meeting.

1) Did you feel like the information presented tonight was helpful in your understanding of what is going on with the United Methodist church?

Yes _____

No _____

I'd like more information _____

2) After hearing the information tonight, would you like for AUMC to:

_____ Enter the formal Discernment process to consider Disaffiliation.

_____ Stay a United Methodist Church.

_____ I'd like more information.

3) What did you find helpful?

*** Please write any other questions/comments for the Listening and Learning Task Force on the back of this survey. Use the space below the dotted line as your name blank portion of the page will be removed as soon as membership is verified, thereby removing any writing above the dotted line.***

Please write any other questions/comments for the Listening and Learning Task Force in the space below.