

Dear First Church Maumelle,

The UMC is divided regarding human sexuality. Those who are traditional and those who are progressive claim the 2024 General Conference our denomination will vote to allow pastors to perform same-sex marriage and to offer ordination to ministry to people in same-sex relationships. Some traditional congregations are preemptively leaving the denomination to form the Global Methodist Church. **Sharing updates related to the denomination and our Annual Conference is why we had a meeting on Wednesday evening June 22.**

At the meeting I shared that our church board voted for me to send a letter using the conference-required language that “for reasons of conscience concerning human sexuality” the church would explore whether to disaffiliate and join the GMC. To be clear, this does not indicate the personal position of members of our board. It reflects their desire to get more detailed information about the discernment process that is not offered on the conference website and keep options open for any future discussions. Also, originally it appeared Bishop Mueller was retiring. We wanted the option of considering these matters before him rather than a stranger if it were the congregation’s wish. He is not retiring after all, and it is likely, though not guaranteed, he will still be our bishop for two more years.

My sending the letter upset some in the church. Individuals in other congregations who heard of the letter have made unflattering statements about my leadership on facebook. To offer clarification, **I read a letter to our congregation from the Bishop officially stating that the congregation-wide, 90-day minimum discernment process has not begun.** He also wrote that the term “letter of intent” which some are using to refer to our letter is not in use in any official document related to this process. “Discernment” is not “intent”. There can be a “yes” vote, a “no” vote, or a vote to end discernment if the congregation starts a process that it has no desire to continue.

The official process requires a detailed 90-day minimum length plan with a communication strategy and dates submitted from our board. That plan would be reviewed for integrity and fairness by the Bishop and cabinet, and approved before any such process begins. Specific requirements for guest speakers and involvement of our DS and Bishop are essential pieces of such a process. **It is the unanimous feeling of the board that starting a 90-day discernment about our congregation’s future denominational affiliation is premature.** I discovered only Some requirements the cabinet is looking for in a 90 day plan are not lined out on their end. The means to join the GMC expires 12/31/23, but other possibilities may surface. A Discipline paragraph may soon be approved that never expires. Any number of new pieces of legislation could be submitted to GC 2024. The stance may not change.

I don’t know the congregation’s will on these matters. Neither does our board. For transparency’s sake, **my conviction is that the Book of Discipline’s current stances on homosexuality are scripturally sound. Those paragraphs are offered at the end of this communication.** I hope to have good dialogue and caring pastoral relationships with all who disagree as well as those who agree. Please be in prayer for the church, your board, your pastor and your staff. This is a great church, and God is faithful.

In Christ,

Pastor Aubrietta Jones

2016 Book of Discipline, Social Principles ¶161.G) Human Sexuality

We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift. Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

We deplore all forms of the commercialization, abuse, and exploitation of sex. We call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation of children and for adequate protection, guidance, and counseling for abused children. All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence. The Church should support the family in providing age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults.

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.[3] [3] See Judicial Council Decision 702.

¶ 304.3 Qualifications for Ordination

While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals¹ are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.[2]

¶161 C) Marriage

We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.[2]

[2] See Judicial Council Decision 694.

Additional paragraphs exist about not offering monetary support to organizations that do not promote these teachings.