

Procedures and Processes for Churches Disaffiliating under ¶ 2553 of the *Book of Discipline*

Effective April 21, 2022 (but not applicable to ¶ 2553 disaffiliations considered at the 2022 June Annual Conference of the Alabama-West Florida Conference)

This document outlines the procedures, processes, terms, and conditions by which a local church in the Alabama-West Florida Conference (AWFC) can exercise the limited right to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church under ¶ 2553 of *The Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church.

1. Process

The decision to disaffiliate from the denomination is solemn and consequential; as such, the process to be followed shall be careful, thoughtful, respectful, and prayerful. The importance of clear and transparent communication and information dissemination, broad involvement, and diligent and proper execution is paramount.

2. Eligibility for Exercising the ¶ 2553 Limited Right of Disaffiliation

A local church is allowed to exercise the limited right established in ¶ 2553 of the *Book of Discipline* to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church only for reasons of conscience under the conditions stated in ¶ 2553.1 which reads: “Basis – Because of the current deep conflict within the United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the *Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow.”

The following changes in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline relating to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals were resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference:

(1) **Amendment to ¶ 304.3:** In particular, footnote 1 of ¶ 304.3 was amended to broaden the scope of relationships or activities that were encompassed in the definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” who, under ¶ 304.3, are “not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

(2) **Amendment to ¶ 304.5:** Prohibitions have been added against approvals and recommendations by the district committee on ordained ministry and the Board of Ordained Ministry of persons who did not meet the qualifications in ¶ 304, including ¶ 304.3 (*see above*), and specified added instructions for the clergy session presiding bishops to rule that the unqualified candidate to be out of order and ineligible for the appointment.

(3) **Amendment to ¶ 415.6:** Amended to prohibit bishops from consecrating bishops, from commissioning persons on the deacon or elders track, and from ordaining deacons or elders if any of them are self-avowed practicing homosexuals.

(4) **Amendment to ¶ 2702.1(b):** Amendment to footnote 1 of ¶ 304.3 (*see above*) affects the usage of the term “self-avowed practicing homosexual” in the list of chargeable offenses related to clergy (*viz.*, “being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies”)

Paragraph 2553 requires that at least two-thirds (2/3) of the professing members present at a church conference, properly held under the *Discipline*, have actual “reasons of conscience” regarding either: (1) one or more of the above-listed changes in the requirements and provisions of the *Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed homosexuals or (2) the subsequent actions or inactions by the Alabama-West Florida Conference related to issues of human sexuality.

The foregoing provisions of this Article 2 shall be included verbatim in the District Superintendent’s call for a church conference pursuant to Section (2) of Article 3 below. If such provisions are included in the call for a church conference, and if the resolutions and motions for disaffiliation required pursuant to Section (2) of Article 3 below are duly adopted by at least two-thirds (2/3) of the professing members present at a church conference, held fairly and in conformance with the *Book of Discipline*, then the AWFC Board of Trustees shall not pursue any inquiry into the “reasons of conscience” behind the vote of the church conference.

3. Procedures:

(1) Discernment and Analysis Period

The local church shall undertake a discernment period between the time the District Superintendent is contacted, and the church conference to vote on disaffiliation is held. This discernment period will include a minimum of one town hall meeting called and led by the District Superintendent so there can be openness and transparency in sharing facts around disaffiliation. The town hall meeting should be held at least two weeks prior to a vote on disaffiliation.

During this period, the District Superintendent initiates assessments of the impact of a ¶ 2553 disaffiliation upon the local church, its members, the community, the district, and the annual conference. These assessments will come from *at least* the district Board of Church Location and Building, the District Superintendent, Cabinet, Treasurer, and Benefits Officer. This assessment shall include, but is not limited to, the assessment of the strategic missional, economic, and ministries impact of the local church and effects of its potential ¶ 2553 disaffiliation.

During this discernment and assessment period, the local church shall hold a minimum of one town hall meeting (listening and discussion sessions) that are advertised a minimum of ten days before the meeting (including two Sundays). The town hall meeting(s) will be open to the full professing membership of the local church and anyone else who is interested in attending. During these sessions, the District Superintendent will share accurate and up-to-date information about disaffiliating from the United Methodist Church. The input of these attending constituents shall be solicited and recorded in writing by a recording secretary. The local church's request for seeking disaffiliation under paragraph 2553 will be presented during the town hall meeting. The town hall(s) shall be convened and presided over/led by the District Superintendent (or his/her designee). The town hall(s) shall not be led or facilitated by the pastors, the hired or appointed staff and employees, or any member or constituent of the local church, its ministries or missions, or anyone else not designated by the District Superintendent.

(2) Church Conference and Vote

Upon completion of the discernment and assessment period and proceedings, the local church may request its District Superintendent to call a church conference pursuant to ¶ 248 of the *Book of Discipline* to consider and vote on the request for ¶ 2553 disaffiliation. The assessments made by the AWFC entities and agencies as described above shall be reported and presented to the church conference.

Pursuant to ¶ 2553.3: "The church conference shall be conducted in accordance with ¶ 248 and shall be held within one hundred twenty (120) days after the District Superintendent calls for the church conference. In addition to the provisions of ¶ 246.8, special attention shall be made to give broad notice to the full professing membership of the local church regarding the time and place of a church conference called for this purpose and to use all means necessary, including electronic communication where possible, to communicate. The decision to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference."

The resolutions or motions for approval of the local church's ¶ 2553 disaffiliation presented at this church conference shall, at a minimum, include the following statements:

- (1) The church conference of the local church hereby certifies to the Alabama-West Florida Conference the following:

The local church is eligible for disaffiliation under the provisions of ¶ 2553.1, which reads: "Basis – Because of the current deep conflict within the United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the *Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues which follow."

(2) Prior to the vote on disaffiliation, the members of the church conference were informed of the following:

The following changes in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline relating to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals were resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference:

(1) **Amendment to ¶ 304.3:** In particular, footnote 1 of ¶ 304.3 was amended to broaden the scope of relationships or activities that were encompassed in the definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” who, under ¶ 304.3, are “not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

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Paragraph 2553 requires that at least two-thirds (2/3) of the professing members present at a church conference, properly held under the *Discipline*, have actual “reasons of conscience” regarding either: (1) one or more of the above-listed changes in the requirements and provisions of the *Book of Discipline* related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed homosexuals or (2) the subsequent actions or inactions by the Alabama-West Florida Conference related to issues of human sexuality.

The local church shall provide documentation to the District Superintendent that verifies the adoption of the required resolution by the church conference and the results of the ¶ 2553 disaffiliation vote taken at the church conference. Such documentation shall be in the form of a certificate of an authorized officer of the local church and shall be included as an exhibit to the agreement to disaffiliate between the local church and the annual conference (“Disaffiliation

Agreement”) which shall be provided to the annual conference delegates before the annual conference vote on approval of the disaffiliation and the Disaffiliation Agreement. In addition, the local church shall provide a membership role with names and current contact information to the presiding district superintendent prior to the church disaffiliation vote.

(3) Disaffiliation Agreement

If the church conference of the local church has voted approval of a ¶ 2553 disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church, a Disaffiliation Agreement shall be formulated. The terms and conditions for the disaffiliation shall be established by the AWFC Board of Trustees, with advice of the AWFC Cabinet, Treasurer, Benefits Officer, Director of Connectional Ministries, and Chancellor. It will be memorialized in a binding Disaffiliation Agreement between the AWFC annual conference and the trustees of the local church, on behalf of its members, in accordance with ¶ 2553.4 of the *Book of Discipline*.

The Disaffiliation Agreement shall include the terms and conditions of the Standard Form for Disaffiliation Agreements developed and promulgated by the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) in accordance with ¶ 2553.4(a) and that was adopted in 2019 by the AWFC, as well as the additional standard terms developed and adopted by the annual conference in 2019 that are not inconsistent with GCFA’s Standard Form for Disaffiliation Agreements. Also included will be the disaffiliation resolution presented to the church conference and the results of the ¶ 2553 disaffiliation vote taken at the church conference, both of which have been authenticated and certified by an authorized officer of the local church.

The Disaffiliation Agreement shall specify (1) that the effective date for the ¶2553 disaffiliation (“Disaffiliation Date”) shall be the date that the Disaffiliation Agreement is ratified and approved by the AWFC, (2) that the delegation of the local church shall not be entitled to vote upon any matters coming before the AWFC after such ratification and approval, and (3) that the closing date for consummation of the transactions contemplated by the Disaffiliation Agreement shall be a date that is subsequent to, and no more than, two weeks after the date that the Disaffiliation Agreement is ratified and approved by the AWFC.

(4) Annual Conference Vote

The Disaffiliation Agreement shall include a provision stating that the parties’ respective rights and obligations under the Disaffiliation Agreement are subject to and conditioned upon the approval and ratification of the ¶2553 disaffiliation and the Disaffiliation Agreement by the AWFC. Therefore, *before* any ¶ 2553 disaffiliation and any terms, conditions, or obligations under that Disaffiliation Agreement applicable to the AWFC are effective and authorized to be undertaken by the AWFC or any AWFC leader, official, entity, or agency, “the disaffiliation agreement [shall] be ratified by a simple majority of the members of the annual conference” at a duly called session of the annual conference. This means that the sale and conveyance of any church or annual conference property, the annual conference’s waiver of the Trust Clause, and

any other acts or duties required to be accomplished by the annual conference under the Disaffiliation Agreement cannot be undertaken and completed until *after* the vote of the annual conference approving and ratifying the ¶ 2553 disaffiliation and the Disaffiliation Agreement.

When the resolution for approval of the Disaffiliation Agreement and the local church's ¶ 2553 disaffiliation is provided and presented to the annual conference delegates, the resolution shall be accompanied by the complete and accurate copy of the Disaffiliation Agreement and the exhibits and schedules. The assessments and recommendations from the AWFC entities and agencies that were developed and presented during the discernment and assessment period are available. Also included are the disaffiliation resolution presented to the church conference and the results of the ¶ 2553 disaffiliation vote taken at the church conference, both of which have been certified by an authorized officer of the local church.

No later than fifteen (15) days before the commencement of the annual conference sessions of the Alabama-West Florida Conference the annual conference shall be provided and given access by the AWFC Secretary to the Church Conference Resolution, Disaffiliation Agreement, and information described in the previous paragraph.

While the United Methodist Church's polity values a spirit of openness and accountability, in those rare instances where circumstances require that some aspect of an action, issue, or matter presented to the annual conference and its delegates be confidential, then the required remedy is for the annual conference and the Bishop to be timely informed of the confidential matters or issues and their convening an executive session of the annual conference (laity and clergy) to discuss that limited confidential portion. This executive session remedy is to be used to ensure that the annual conference and its delegates do not lack the ability to make a well-informed and reasoned decision without impeding the safeguarding role of the annual conference and its delegates within the United Methodist Church's system of checks and balances.

The annual conference's approval and ratification of a disaffiliation agreement is completed by a vote up or down by the members of an annual conference but does not include the right to amend.