

# **Beginning Again**

**A Guide**

**For**

**Remaining In**

**The United Methodist Church**

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## Introduction

It's said that every morning, Francis of Assisi would face the rising sun, raise his hands and exclaim, "Today I begin with God." He reflected the spirit of followers of Christ, who is always ahead of us (Matthew 13:52), leading us into new discoveries. That's why the image of the Christian life is a journey, not a destination. As Thomas Merton put it, we are "beginners all our days."<sup>1</sup>

In our day, Jesus is leading us into another new awakening. It is a pivotal time in the world and a season of renewal for the Church. A fresh wind of the Spirit is blowing, and God is calling us to raise our sails and journey in new ways and in new directions.<sup>2</sup>

This spirit of adventure is in our Wesleyan DNA. The early Methodist movement reached the marginalized, renewed the Church, and reformed the nation through fresh expressions of Christian faith. As United Methodists, we are heirs of this spirit.

But new awakenings do not occur without challenges. They are times of disorder, moving us from previous order to emerging reorder.<sup>3</sup> Theologically, Paul called it a new creation, made possible as old things pass away so that new things can come (2 Corinthians 5:17). He compared the experience of labor pains which precede Christ being formed on us (Galatians 4:19).

**A new United Methodist Church is emerging.** It is a new-wineskin expression of the Body of Christ (Matthew 9:14-17), a kingdom-of-God manifestation that brings forth treasures old and new (Matthew 13:52). In the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, "A Charge to Keep I Have," **the emerging UMC will respond to God's call** "to serve the present age."

**This guide is offered to help you remain United Methodist, and do so with purpose, meaning, and joy.** It is intentionally in outline form, giving you enough information to act on, but leaving enough room to do so contextually and creatively. There is no one-size-fits all paradigm, but there are useful practices that we can apply to our unique situations. Most of all, remember that you are not alone as you and your friends are "beginning again." Use the "Directory" section (page 10) of this guide to get in touch with those who can help you.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Contemplative Prayer' (Inage Books, 1971), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Harper, 'Fresh Wind Blowing' (Cascade Books, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, 'The Wisdom Pattern' (Franciscan Media, 2020).

## What if My Church is Voting on Disaffiliation?

In one way or another, every congregation in the United Methodist Church will decide whether to stay in the denomination or leave it. If your church is moving toward disaffiliation, there are things to do before the vote is taken, when it is taken, and after it is taken. Here are steps to take in each phase of the process.

### Before the Vote is Taken

1. Designate someone to communicate with those who want to remain United Methodist.
2. Develop an initial email list of such folk and grow it over time.
3. Let outside helpers know you have created a “remain UMC” group.<sup>[1]</sup>
4. Provide occasional email updates about what's happening.
5. See to it that all options are accurately and fairly presented.
6. Dispel rumors and untruths with facts.
7. Do what you can to resist disaffiliation with a good spirit (Ephesians 4:13).

### When the Vote is Taken

1. Show up and vote, so the record clearly shows how many want to remain UMC.
2. Designate someone to cogently make the case for remaining.
3. At the end of the meeting, have someone say, “Will those who voted to remain in the UMC meet me here for a brief meeting?”
4. If any new people gather, add them to the email list.
5. Announce a first “Beginning Again” meeting.<sup>[2]</sup>

### After the Vote is Taken

1. Let your outside helpers know that you will commence “Beginning Again” meetings.
2. Email your list inviting them to the first meeting.

<sup>[1]</sup> At this point, please contact your district superintendent. There may be additional helpers identified soon.

<sup>[2]</sup> Even when a congregation votes to disaffiliate, it does not take effect immediately. You have time to conduct a series of “Beginning Again” meetings. The next section of this manual guides you as you do this.

## Beginning Again

If your church votes to disaffiliate, it will mean the loss of many things you have held dear. The challenge will be to move beyond the loss and commence the process of “beginning again.” Henri Nouwen described the challenge this way, “Every time there are losses there are choices to be made. You either choose to live your losses as passages to anger, blame, hatred, depression, and resentment, or you choose to let these losses be passages into to something new, something wider, and deeper. The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to greater life and freedom.”<sup>4</sup>

The “Beginning Again” process is one rooted in the belief that “God is with us” and doing a new thing among us (Isaiah 43:19). With respect to the United Methodist Church, it is trusting that God is at work to make a new wineskin to hold and pour out the wine of the Gospel. “Beginning Again” is your commitment to be part of the emerging UMC.

The previous section of this guide took you through the initial “Beginning Again” meeting. This section will guide you through subsequent ones. You will determine the number of times you need to gather, but the aim of these meetings is threefold: to **discover your vision**, to **declare your intentions**, and to **develop your means for remaining in the UMC**.<sup>5</sup>

**Before turning to these three things, a few general reminders.** Keep the worship/work pattern going. We find light and life at the nexus of the vertical (worship) and horizontal (work). As William Temple put it, “Worship is the central act of the people of God.” We do our work best as a response to God's work in, among, and through us. Plan for worship that includes singing, praying, and encouraging devotionals rooted in Scripture and tradition.

Also, at each meeting, be sure your email list is up to date. Effective communication is crucial in the “Beginning Again” journey.

As you begin this re-formation experience, have someone designated to record every response. Even if some are not immediately enacted, they may come back around later. Some groups write responses on a white board and take a picture of it to preserve the input. Capturing specific input is a way to demonstrate that every person's ideas matter. Include pauses and quiet reflection to honor comments and give them time to sink in.

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, ‘You Are the Beloved’ (Image Books, 2017), reading for November 9<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The threefold paradigm (vision, intention, means) is one designed by Richard Foster and the Renovaré ministry. It is the structure for the ‘Life With God Bible,’ (Harper, 2005), which you may find to be a useful resource.

## Discover the Vision

The following questions will help you envision the kind of group you want to be.

1. What do you value in your faith?
2. How did your congregation help you strengthen and live those values?
3. What aspects of Methodism are most meaningful to you?
4. How did your congregation help you strengthen and live those aspects?
5. What did you not find in your congregation that you had hoped to find?
6. What needs in your location are the most pressing right now?
7. Who are the unreached people in your location?
8. When you think of being a “loving fellowship,” what comes to mind?

## Declare Your Intentions

1. What priorities do you choose, as you form your new group?  
Group them as,
  - life together priorities (for the group)
  - life for others (for the community)
  - life for all (for the world)
2. Turn your priorities into a mission statement,  
“God being our helper, we intend to become a group that \_\_\_\_\_.”

## Develop Your Means

1. What form will our group take? <sup>[1]</sup>
2. Where shall we meet, when, how often?
3. How shall we be present in our location?
4. What will we do to be connected to the emerging UMC? <sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> The “Beginning Again Group” model is one option; see the section that describes it.

<sup>[2]</sup> Consult with your helpers to learn ways of being connected.

## What About My UMC Membership?

In the event your church chooses to disaffiliate, you should be aware that upon ratification of that disaffiliation at the next Annual Conference meeting following your church's disaffiliation vote, all persons then on your church's membership roll will no longer be UMC members, but will become members of the new church, whether it is independent or part of another denomination. You must take action to remain a UMC member. There are a variety of ways to do this.

Here are some options for ways to remain in the UMC:

1. Transfer your membership to a nearby congregation that is remaining in the UMC. You should do this before the Annual Conference officially ratifies the disaffiliation of your congregation.
2. If you do not know of a nearby church remaining in the UMC, check with your District Superintendent to see what another option might be.

Baypines & Mobile: Rev. Dr. Debora Bishop,  
ds.deborabishop@gmail.com

Demopolis & Montgomery-Prattville: Rev. Dr. Mike Pearson,  
ds.mikepearson@gmail.com

Dothan & Montgomery-Opelika: Rev. Dr. Jeff Wilson,  
ds.jeffwilson@gmail.com

Marianna-Panama City & Pensacola: Rev. Jean Tippit,  
jeantippit.dsumc@gmail.com

3. The Conference has also set up a link for transferring your membership to the general church roll. Check out this link for the form and other resources:  
<https://www.awfumc.org/continuing-as-a-united-methodist-church-member-transferring-membership>

Here's the bottom line: you can remain a member of the United Methodist Church. Be proactive to see that it happens.

## Beginning Again Groups

In the “Beginning Again” process, you are led to the point of deciding what kind of group you want to be. It can take many forms.

The focus of Beginning Again Groups is twofold: (1) to hold together those whose church has disaffiliated (or closed), leaving them “homeless,” ...and... (2) to foster life together through spiritual formation in the Wesleyan tradition. The “Resources” section (page 9) of this guide will help you discover materials to use in your meetings. The meeting itself unfolds along these lines; with any adaptations you may design to make your group more meaningful.

10 minutes: gathering, welcome, and opening prayer

20 minutes: program study

20 minutes: group discussion\*\*

10 minutes: closing, prayer, announcement of next meeting

Group discussion should take place in the way that’s best for the group. It is important to be clear that attentive listening is a form of participation; no one should be required or feel pressure to speak. Additionally, the group leader should “shepherd” the discussion so that no one (or a few) dominate the conversation. One way to do this is to respond to an over-zealous speaker by saying, “It is clear this session is really important for you. That’s great. But before we deal with this, let’s see what others may want to share about what’s important to them.”

\*\*a possible discussion scenario—a cycle of questions that moves along this path,

1. What was “the big idea” you got from this session?
2. Why was it important for you to have that idea now?
3. How might you apply it to your life?
4. How might you express it for the good of someone else?

## Resources

Once you have completed the “Beginning Again” process, you will want to continue meeting using resources that suit your mission. Because the emerging UMC is rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, begin with meetings that connect you with this tradition. Abingdon Press (through [Amplify Media](#)) has published a four-volume study for doing this. In addition to the books, there are additional (but not required) accompanying videos, a leader's guide, and participants' guide.

1. Steve Harper, 'Five Marks of a Methodist'
2. Rueben Job, 'Three Simple Rules'
3. Elaine Heath, 'Five Means of Grace'
4. Magrey deVega, 'One Faithful Promise'

When you have finished this study journey, you will be ready to move ahead with additional resources from Amplify Media (<https://amplifymedia.com>). They have thousands of resources to choose from.

We also recommend resources available from 'The Upper Room' (<https://www.upperroom.org>) and from 'Renovaré' ([www.renovare.org](http://www.renovare.org))

The helpers you have been in touch with throughout the “Beginning Again” experience will likely have other good resources to suggest. You can also use the “Directory” section (page 10) of this guide to see what others have to offer.

## Directory

Throughout this guide the idea that “you are not alone” has been emphasized. It is true! The United Methodist Church is a connectional church. But it does not feel like it in the throes of disaffiliation. Here are contacts and ministries ready to walk with you as you remain in the UMC.

1. **Your District Superintendent.** This person has walked with you through the disaffiliation experience. Continue turning to your DS for guidance.

Baypines & Mobile: Rev. Dr. Debora Bishop,  
ds.deborabishop@gmail.com

Demopolis & Montgomery-Prattville: Rev. Dr. Mike Pearson,  
ds.mikepearson@gmail.com

Dothan & Montgomery-Opelika: Rev. Dr. Jeff Wilson,  
ds.jeffwilson@gmail.com

Marianna-Panama City & Pensacola: Rev. Jean Tippit,  
jeantippit.dsumc@gmail.com

2. **Your District Administrators.** These people can help you get in contact with your DS if needed.

North District: Charlene Moncrief  
charlene@awfumc.org

South District: Kim Doss  
kim@awfumc.org

3. **Support Ministries.** There are many of them, and others are arising. Here are website links to some of them

- The United Methodist Church ([www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org))
- BeUMC ([umc.org/beumc](http://umc.org/beumc))
- Discipleship Ministries (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org>)
- Fresh Expressions UM (a subset of Discipleship Ministries)
- Resource UMC ([www.resourceumc.org](http://www.resourceumc.org))
- UMsConnected ([www.umsconnected.com](http://www.umsconnected.com))