



UMCSC Trustees: One more round for Local Church Discernment Process

The Trustees of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church released this statement regarding the continuation of the Local Church Discernment Process into 2025:

August 5, 2024

The Trustees of the South Carolina Conference will continue to offer the Local Church Discernment Process as a means for local churches to determine whether they will separate from The United Methodist Church.

The process, which concludes with a vote by lay and clergy members of the Annual Conference, will not continue after the 2025 Annual Conference.

The Local Church Discernment Process, and the related Separation Agreement, are centered on Paragraph 2549 of the UMC Book of Discipline.

Requests for declaratory decisions on the constitutionality of the use of Paragraph 2549 – which historically has been employed to close churches that are no longer able to function as United Methodist congregations – are on the fall docket of the UMC Judicial Council. Any decision by the Judicial Council could affect the continued use of Paragraph 2549 as a means for separation.

The final round of the Local Church Discernment Process is available for churches whose congregations already have voted in 2024 to separate from the denomination, but were not able to meet the requirements of the Separation Agreement in time for the 2024 South Carolina Annual Conference to vote on their departure. Churches whose congregations have never voted on whether to separate also are authorized to engage in the process.

During a July 26 meeting, Trustees voted to extend the process for one more year and to update the “Checklist for Closure and Separation.” They also discussed at length a resolution approved by the 2024 Annual Conference asking them to set aside at least \$5 million of those funds specifically to assist churches whose congregations are predominantly black, indigenous, and people of color.

While Trustees expressed their support for assisting BIPOC congregations, they voted to make no changes in how the funds received from separating churches are distributed. It is important, Trustees believe, to maintain the board’s historical independence. That principle is grounded in the Book of Discipline, which gives Trustees sole discretion for determining how best to use the funds from departing churches.

BIPOC congregations can and often do benefit from the areas of ministry that have been given funds received from separating churches.

After the 2023 Annual Conference approved the separation of 113 local churches, the Trustees distributed or set aside just over \$17.5 million received from these churches for specific purposes, including direct ministry grants shared through the districts; disbursements to conference ministries, to the Council on Finance and Administration, and to Congregational Development; unfunded pension liabilities; direct billing for pastors’ pension and health benefits; and potential legal expenses.