

Dear Athens First UMC friends,

Thank you for registering for one of our AFUMC discernment team listening sessions! Your willingness to participate in these vital conversations with our congregation is an important part of the discernment process at our church and we're grateful that you're able to join us.

Our goal in these listening sessions is two-fold. First, we want to help our congregation better understand the recent changes that were made to the United Methodist Book of Discipline as it relates to same sex marriage and why there's been such contentious debate about this in our denomination for the last 50 years. Second, we want to create an intentional opportunity to hear from our congregation and answer any questions that you may have.

So, how will these listening sessions work?

When you arrive, you'll be given a nametag and an assigned table number. Each of our round tables will have one of our discernment team members present to help facilitate our small group discussion. I'll begin each listening session with an overview of what we're doing, what our discernment team has been working on, and the historical, biblical, and theological background behind the debate on human sexuality and same-sex marriage in the UMC.

Then our discernment team members will guide us in small group discussions at each table and we'll close with a time for Questions and Answers with a panel of our discernment team members.

Of course, I realize that you may have some questions ahead of our listening sessions that you'd like answers to before these conversations. So, below you'll find answers to a few of the most frequently asked questions I've gotten from church members over the past nine months. I hope you find them helpful.

I look forward to seeing you at our listening sessions!

Grace + Peace,

Jeremy

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the context and history behind the debate on human sexuality and same-sex marriage in the UMC?

If you've been a part of the United Methodist Church for a while, you probably know that our denomination has had a long-standing debate and no shortage of conflicting views on human sexuality and same-sex marriage.

In fact, it all started back in 1968 when the General Conference of the UMC appointed a committee to draft a new social creed, which was then presented for approval in 1972. This creed was described as "a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation" (*BOD* Part V Preface). Although much of it reflected earlier Methodist social creeds, this latest creed introduced for the first time a statement on homosexuality. While Methodists had publicly debated topics like contraception, sex education, and divorce, homosexuality had not been formally addressed before.

The proposed creed affirmed that gay persons are people of sacred worth in the eyes of God. Indeed, they are people who are in need of the church's ministry, guidance, and grace. This statement was approved and included in our Book of Discipline. However, the delegates were still deeply divided over other aspects of the creed and, ultimately, the final version included an amendment stating: "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." (§161.G).

Since its inclusion in the Book of Discipline in 1972, this statement has been the subject of considerable debate and every General Conference since then has considered proposals to remove it. Over the years, the vote margins

gradually narrowed until it was finally approved for removal from the United Methodist Book of Discipline in May 2024.

How does the removal of the restrictive language around human sexuality impact our local church?

Ultimately, the removal of this language gives every local UMC the autonomy and authority to create a wedding and building-use policy that reflects their congregation's theological interpretation on this matter. This means that while UMC churches are permitted to host same-sex weddings, it's not required, and that decision will now be made at the local church level.

How does a local church like Athens First UMC make such a determination?

Good question! After all, when you're a church with over 4,400 members, it's common to have lots of different people who hold a variety of different theological perspectives on a variety of different subjects. In other words, it's to be expected that in a large church like Athens First UMC, we would have plenty of theological disagreements.

Of course, theological disagreements are nothing new in the Church. From our earliest days, we've wrestled with what it means to be a faithful community of Jesus followers when we don't see eye-to-eye on everything from the inclusion of Gentiles in the church (Acts 15) to slavery, divorce, the ordination of women in ministry, civil rights, and so much more.

Therefore, my proposal to our church leadership is that we would do what the Church has always done anytime we've faced a theological impasse: We enter into a season of holy, prayerful discernment.

Biblically speaking, discernment is more than just a decision-making process—it's a spiritual gift and a spiritual discipline. The Greek word that the New Testament uses for discernment is "*diakrisis*," which literally means "spiritual assessment, consideration, and understanding." 1 Corinthians 12 describes it as one of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to edify and strengthen the body of Christ.

With that in mind, our church council approved the formation of a discernment team made up of clergy and church members who were asked to serve not because of their specific opinion on any given subject, but because they've proven to be knowledgeable in Scripture, Spirit-led, and who display gifts of wisdom, faith, discernment, listening, critical thinking, and humility. Since September 2024, this team has met regularly to pray, study Scripture, and engage in faithful conversation to seek God's will for our church.

However, in the church, discernment isn't done in isolation; it always happens in community. Which is precisely why we're having our listening sessions. It's because we believe that real discernment involves God's people gathering together with listening ears, prayerful dialogue, understanding hearts, patient spirits, and a willingness to put aside personal agendas for the sake of the good of the body of Christ. Indeed, it's how we seek God's way and God's will for God's people and prioritize what is best for the whole.

After our listening sessions, our discernment team will take all of the information we've gathered through our meetings, our churchwide survey, and our listening sessions and we'll make a presentation to the Church Council and the Board of Trustees. Our hope is be able to share what we've learned about church in and through the discernment process and ultimately make a recommendation to the Trustees that will help them create a church wedding policy that will demonstrate God's love, bring God glory, foster unity within our congregation, honor the authority of Scripture, and enable us to witness to the faith of Jesus in our community and beyond.

How can people in the UMC have such differing and conflicting views on such important biblical and theological subjects?

If there's one thing I've learned in all my years of being a United Methodist, it's that there are few things we do better than disagree with each other on important issues. Of course, that's not to say there aren't lots of things that we agree on. In fact, our Articles of Religion (which can be [found here](#)) are a great example of biblical and theological unity within our church.

However, when it comes to issues like abortion, capital punishment, military service, climate change, universal healthcare, or a myriad of other topics, United Methodists often don't see eye-to-eye. But that's a part of our theological DNA.

In fact, to understand the history of any of the theological debates or disagreements we've had in the UMC, we have to start in the beginning with the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. For Wesley, the Bible was the foundation of his faith. In fact, in the preface to *Sermons*, Wesley wrote:

"I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri--a man of one book."

Indeed, Wesley believed—and our UMC Articles of Religion affirm—that the Bible contains everything necessary for salvation. However, John Wesley didn't believe in biblical inerrancy or the belief that Bible is "without error." Instead, he believed that Scripture must be properly interpreted through reason, church tradition, and personal and corporate experiences with God—a theological approach United Methodists continue to follow today.

Although some theologians in church history, like Martin Luther, saw human reason as something that can be corrupted by the devil, John Wesley saw it as a beautiful gift from God. He didn't want Methodists to "check their brain at the door" when coming to church, but instead, he wanted to think deeply about matters of faith and to ask difficult theological questions as they explored God's word.

Because of Wesley's influence, the United Methodist Church has always been a place that has welcomed faithful debate, differences of opinion, and even theological disagreements. We don't see theological diversity as a threat to our faith but something that God can use to help us grow spiritually, deepen our discipleship, and broaden our understanding of God.

What is your hope and prayer for Athens First UMC in this process?

Sometimes when I read the Apostle Paul's letters to his churches in the New Testament, I'm amazed at how little has changed in the Church in 2,000 years. When Paul was writing to his churches back in the 1st Century, he was writing to address, among other things, any number of congregational disagreements and theological debates that they were having. Now, here we are two millennia later and not much is different.

But when I look at Paul's letter, I'm struck by the fact that what got Paul upset with his churches isn't the fact that they were having theological disagreements but rather how they were behaving in the midst of those disagreements. In other words, Paul was mad that the Church wasn't acting very Christ-like with one another.

For instance, when Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he was writing to a deeply divided church because half of the congregation had a Jewish background, and they saw their newfound faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of their Jewish faith and the other half were Gentiles who came from a pagan background.

To say the least, this was a very divided congregation, who had lots of different opinions and perspectives and upbringings. They almost never saw eye to eye on almost anything and it caused lots of arguments and fights and disagreements.

So, what do you say to a church that is so divided and struggling to get along?

In chapter 4, Paul says, **"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."**

In other words, he reminds them of who they are and how they're called to live out their faith with one another as the body of Christ—even when they don't agree.

That's my prayer for our church. Not just in this process of discernment, but in everything we do. I realize that we, like the early church, won't always see eye-to-eye on everything and we may have disagreements. But what's far more important is that in the midst of those disagreements, we would be willing to exhibit Christ-like humility, gentleness, and patience with one another. My prayer is that we would be willing to "bear with one another in love" and "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

In my opinion, not only is that what we're called to do as the body of Christ, but I also believe that it's what God uses to deepen our faith and strengthen our discipleship. When we're willing to engage in hard conversations about important matters with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, it opens us up to the movement of the Holy Spirit to see things with new eyes and be exposed to different perspectives. Indeed, some of the most significant moments of spiritual growth I've ever experienced happened because I was willing to sit across the table from someone that had a different theological viewpoint than me and we were willing to listen to one another with humility, patience, and love.

In all of this, my prayer is that our church will be found faithful. Faithful to God, faithful to each other, and faithful to living a life worthy of the calling we've received.