

**Media Information for the November 12, 2023, Alabama-West Florida
Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church
Special-called Session**

Statement from Bishop David Graves

“Today is another somber day in the life of the Alabama-West Florida Conference,” stated Bishop David Graves. “We are saddened to say farewell to the eight churches disaffiliating from the United Methodist Church and wish them the best in ministry. We pray for these churches as they navigate ministry in a new season. I especially want to thank those churches who have decided to remain United Methodist and those who heard my call to refrain from holding discussions around leaving the denomination until we have more information. I appreciate your faithfulness to your call and covenant all while leading your churches in a most difficult season.”

About the Alabama-West Florida Conference

The Alabama-West Florida Conference is the geographical area from the middle of Alabama south to the state line and west Florida to Port St. Joe. At the end of 2022 the conference congregations reported 111,612 professing members. In 2022 the Alabama-West Florida Conference reported an average of 32,061 people participating in in-person worship each week. **Numbers are reported end of year and not yet available for 2023.*

Following the November 12 Special Session:

- The Alabama-West Florida Conference had 319 local congregations as of November 12, 2023.
- 311 congregations continue to be part of the Alabama-West Florida Conference.
- Eleven churches out of the 319 Alabama-West Florida Conference churches have membership over 1,000 and remain United Methodist.
- The Alabama-West Florida Conference continues to start new congregations and ministries in areas where current United Methodist congregations are leaving the denomination. These will include new churches and faith communities.

About the Eight Disaffiliating Churches

Eight out of 319 churches in Alabama-West Florida Conference disaffiliated on November 12, 2023.

See list here: <https://www.awfumc.org/november-2023-local-church-disaffiliations>

These eight disaffiliating churches comprise approximately:

- 2.51% of the churches in the Alabama-West Florida Conference.
- 8% of the membership of the Alabama-West Florida Conference.
- 6.52% of the reported in-person worship attendance of the Alabama-West Florida Conference.
- One out of eight churches with membership over 1000.

Statistical Overview *(Based on last official reported stats collected at end of 2022)*

Membership:

- Six of the eight disaffiliating churches have membership under 50.
- One of the eight disaffiliating churches has membership under 100.
- One of the eight disaffiliating churches reported membership over 1000 (Christ United Methodist Church, Mobile).

In-person Worship Attendance:

- The average in-person weekly worship attendance reported by the disaffiliating churches was 1.63% of total conference membership.
- Six of the eight disaffiliating churches reported an average in-person weekly worship attendance of less than 50.
- Christ UMC, Mobile is the only disaffiliating church that reported an average weekly in-person worship of more than 1,000.

Local Church Disaffiliation Vote

- While an average of 19.45% of church membership regularly attend worship at these eight churches, on average only 16% of membership was represented at the vote to decide the future of their church.

Disaffiliating Churches by District

By District:

Baypines	0	Mobile	1
Demopolis	2	Montgomery-Opelika	1
Dothan	0	Montgomery-Prattville	3
Marianna-Panama City	1	Pensacola	0

Church Disaffiliations

On Sunday, November 12, 2023, the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church held a called special session for the purpose of processing current requests from local congregations for disaffiliation under ¶2553 of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*. *The Book of Discipline* is the denomination's book of law, doctrine and policy.

This new paragraph was added by the 2019 General Conference and established terms and conditions for churches wishing to disaffiliate from the denomination over matters of conscience related to human sexuality. The General Conference is the top legislative body of The United Methodist Church and the only body that can amend church law.

The United Methodist Church currently maintains prohibitions on same sex weddings and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy. Most congregations and clergy currently seeking to leave the denomination point to some regions of the church within the United States failing to fully enforce the *Book of Discipline's* standards for ordination and marriage. In the Alabama-West Florida Conference, Conference leaders have not changed their commitment to upholding the *Book of Discipline*, joining the majority of United Methodists around the world in this ongoing commitment.

The disaffiliation process established in ¶2553 offers a limited way for congregations to leave the denomination and take full ownership of their buildings and other assets by releasing them from The United Methodist Church's centuries-old trust clause. The trust clause was established by Methodism's founder John Wesley in the 18th century and states that a local church owns the property in trust for the entire denomination. The creation of ¶2553 marks the first time in its history the denomination has set procedures for U.S. congregations to leave The United Methodist Church and not have to purchase their property in order to maintain ownership.

The provisions of the *Book of Discipline* ¶2553 officially expire on December 31, 2023.

Paragraph 2553 establishes the minimum requirements for disaffiliation and gives the Annual Conference Trustees the authority to establish the process, terms, and conditions for disaffiliation within the Annual Conference. The Alabama-West Florida process for disaffiliation is comprised of multiple steps a congregation must take including:

- an intentional time of prayer, learning and discernment over several months
- An impact assessment by teams appointed by the District Superintendent
- An eligibility statement
- A completed good faith and fair process form
- a vote of approval for disaffiliation by at least a two-thirds majority of a church's professing members present at an in-person congregational vote

- paying in full all financial responsibilities required by the *Book of Discipline* ¶2553 which include the congregation's fair share of unfunded clergy pension liability that not only supports the church's current pastor but those pastors who previously served the congregation; two years of apportionments, which are the local congregation's responsibility to support the regional, national and global ministry of The United Methodist Church; and all costs for transfer of property title.

The final step is ratification of a church's disaffiliation by a simple majority vote of the Annual Conference. The churches that were voted on by the clergy and lay members from throughout the Alabama-West Florida Conference during the November 12 meeting completely fulfilled their disaffiliation agreement with the Conference Trustees. No congregation has officially disaffiliated until all of the steps have been completed and their disaffiliation is ratified by Annual Conference vote.

Those Alabama-West Florida congregations who disaffiliated from The United Methodist Church on November 12 are choosing a variety of futures for their ministries.

The next meeting of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church will be April 23 – May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Establishing New United Methodist Ministries

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." -2 Corinthians 5:17

In this season of resurrection and new life, the Alabama-West Florida Conference proudly announces the launching of our new ministry strategy team. This team will lead our conference in planting new faith communities, as well as coaching churches to reach new people in new ways. Rev. Jean Tippit, current Marianna-Panama City and Pensacola District Superintendent, will serve as the director of this team while continuing her duties as a district superintendent. In addition to this director position, five new ministry cultivators have also been named:

- Rev. Dan Baughman, pastor of St. Mark UMC, Pensacola
- Rev. Mike von Keyserling, pastor of Sneads United Methodist Church
- Jenn Lusher, lay person and former AWF Director of Leadership Strategies
- Rev. Brennan Peacock, pastor of Luverne United Methodist Church
- Jennifer Precht, soon-to-be licensed local pastor

These five cultivators will be assigned to churches rather than regions or districts and officially began their work May 1, 2023. For those who are serving a local church they will continue in their current appointment in addition to this ministry strategy work. This team will collectively help cultivate new churches, revitalize existing churches and assist with starting the healing process.

"We have all experienced a very difficult season of life," stated Bishop David Graves. "However, this news gives me energy and the promise of a new day in this conference. Our focus moving

forward will be starting new churches in places where there is no longer a United Methodist presence while also working with our existing churches to reach their current communities in new and innovative ways. Join me in praying for these servant leaders as they guide this critical work of the conference.”

Eleven new churches/faith communities are also in the process of being launched. They are as follows.

- ARK New Church Start
- DeFuniak Springs New Church Start
- Destin/Niceville New Church Start
- Grand Ridge New Church Start
- Magnolia UMC, Orange Beach and Gulf Shores area
- Foundry UMC, Opelika, AL
- Open Door United Methodist Church, Pace, FL
- Pike Road New Church Start
- Grace UMC, Prattville, AL
- Restoration United Methodist Church, Cottondale, FL
- Troy New Church Start

“I am honored to serve in this role in addition to my current appointment,” stated Rev. Jean Tippit, new director. “This new ministry will be life giving to so many in our conference and I look forward to seeing the fruit of this labor. We will be a stronger conference with the ability to make more disciples by making this work a priority. I am excited to see God work through this team.”