

## **Alabama-West Florida Conference 2549.3(a) Policy**

Effective July 1, 2024<sup>1</sup>

This document outlines the procedures, processes, terms, and conditions by which a local church in the Alabama-West Florida Conference may voluntarily transfer title to all its real and personal, tangible and intangible property to the Annual Conference Board of Trustees in accordance with paragraph 2549.3(a) of the Discipline and close as a United Methodist Church under ¶2549.3(a) of The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, a copy of which is attached hereto.

### 1. Process

The decision to close as a United Methodist congregation is solemn and consequential; as such, the process to be followed shall be careful, thoughtful, respectful, and prayerful. The importance of clear, accurate, respectful, and transparent communication and information dissemination, broad involvement, and diligent and proper execution is paramount.

### 2. Consideration for closure as a United Methodist Church under ¶2549.3(a)

If The United Methodist Book of Discipline approved by the 2020 General Conference held in 2024:

- a) Removes the autonomy of the Board of Ordained Ministry or the clergy session of an annual conference to approve candidates for ordination, commissioning, and licensing, or
- b) Removes the autonomy of the District Committee on Ministry to certify candidates for ministry, or
- c) Removes the right of a pastor to decide whom to marry, or
- d) Removes the right of a Board of Trustees of a local church to determine its sanctuary wedding policy(s), or
- e) The Alabama-West Florida Conference requires your local church to receive a pastor who is a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual”,

Then the Conference Trustees and Cabinet may consider such changes as “reason(s) of conscience” for a local church to close via paragraph 2549.3(a). This consideration cannot be given until after any changes to the Book of Discipline have been reviewed by the Judicial Council (if applicable) and have gone into effect.

### 3. Procedures:

#### (1) Church Council Votes to Enter Discernment and Assessment Period

The local church council may by majority vote enter into a process of discernment and assessment for the closure of a local church as a United Methodist congregation under

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<sup>1</sup> This policy only applies in the absence of new legislation from General Conference 2024

¶2549.3(a). The church council must adopt a resolution requesting to enter the discernment process for closure as a United Methodist congregation. This request may only be based on the considerations stated above in number 2.

A copy of the official minutes from the church council meeting during which the vote was taken to enter the process shall be shared with the District Superintendent and Alabama-West Florida Conference Trustees. The minutes shall include the total number of possible church council votes, how many were present, and how many voted for and against the actions. The church shall also provide all other actions, motions, minutes, and petitions presented to the church council.

If a church council considers a motion to enter the process and the motion fails to receive a majority vote, that local church is prohibited from taking another vote to enter the process for at least twelve months.

## (2) Discernment and Assessment Period

The local church shall undertake a discernment period between the time the District Superintendent responds and the church conference to vote on closure as a United Methodist Church is held. This discernment period shall be at least 75 days. The window of discernment begins when the District Superintendent responds to the local church's request to begin the process. This discernment period will include at a minimum:

There shall be at least one town hall meeting called and led by the District Superintendent so there can be openness and transparency in sharing facts around closure as a United Methodist Church. The date and time of the town hall must be 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 closures as a United Methodist Church. The town hall(s) shall be convened and presided over/led by the District Superintendent (or his/her designee). The town hall must include a spokesperson from the United Methodist Church that is not the District Superintendent chairing the Church Conference. This spokesperson shall be selected by the District Superintendent from a select team of people trained by the Alabama-West Florida Conference Trustees for this task. 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.

A minimum period of 40 days of congregation-wide prayer and fasting shall be conducted within the membership of the local church to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in these weighty matters.

The local church shall provide a complete list with full names, email addresses, and mailing addresses of all full professing members of the local church, preferably electronically and in Excel format.

The distribution of information in writing via email and/or USPS to all members about closure as a United Methodist Church prepared by the Alabama-West Florida Conference and provided by the District Superintendent.

The discernment and official proceedings and discussions should not include the following:

1. Information that does not apply to the church's reason(s) of conscience for requesting closure as a United Methodist Church shared by church leaders at any official church meeting to consider closure as a United Methodist Church or through official church communications.
2. References to seeking closure as a United Methodist Church because it is a financial opportunity to "own" your building and get out of the historic trust clause.
3. Presentations by any groups or individuals discussing or sharing information regarding alternatives to remaining a United Methodist Church. The decision to close as a United Methodist Church is not a choice between alternatives.

Pastors and staff of a church in the process of closure as a United Methodist Church shall use their best efforts to maintain the integrity of the process as outlined in 2549.3(a).

#### District Superintendent Assessment

1. During this period, the District Superintendent initiates assessments of the impact of a closure as a United Methodist Church upon the local church, its members, the community, the district, and the annual conference. These assessments will come from a ¶213 committee designated by the Cabinet to complete the assessment forms, the District Superintendent, Cabinet, Treasurer, and Benefits Officer. This assessment shall include the process described in ¶213, and is not limited to the assessment of the strategic missional, economic, and ministries impact of the local church and effects of its potential closure as a United Methodist Church. It also must include an independent appraisal of the local church's real property, with the cost covered by the local church.
2. The District Superintendent initiates a legal assessment to obtain and consider an opinion of legal counsel as to the existence of any reversion, possibility of reverter, right of reacquisition, or similar restrictions to the benefit of any party.
3. The District Superintendent develops a plan for the transfer of the membership of the local church (¶ 229).
4. The District Superintendent shall assess whether actions and communications evidence a fair process with accurate information that reflects a good faith effort to satisfy this

procedures and process document as opposed to false, misleading statements and/or coordinated efforts likely to harm or disrupt the ministry of the church.

### (3) Church Council Votes to Request Church Conference

Upon completion of the discernment and assessment period and proceedings, if the local church council wishes to proceed toward closure as a United Methodist Church, the next steps are as follows:

The Church Council must attest to the previously adopted request for closure as a United Methodist Church as a United Methodist congregation.

Additionally, a completed and notarized good faith and fair process form must be received by the District Superintendent before a Church Conference may be called by a District Superintendent. The signatories on the form shall certify and agree that, to the best of their knowledge, the discernment process as outlined in this document has been followed fairly and in good faith. The discernment period has not included any of the following:

- Information that does not apply to the church's reason(s) of conscience for closure as a United Methodist Church.
- References to seeking closure as a United Methodist Church because it is a financial opportunity to "own" your building and get out of the historic trust clause.
- Presentations by any groups or individuals discussing or sharing information regarding alternatives to remaining a United Methodist congregation.

The process shall include an assessment of whether actions and communications evidence a fair process with accurate information that reflects a good faith effort to satisfy this process.

The request for closure as a United Methodist Church provided by the local church and the good faith form provided by the District Superintendent must be signed by all elders, deacons, and local pastors appointed to or serving the church seeking to discontinue, and the church's Lay Leader, Church Council/Administrative Board Chair, Trustee Chair, SPRC Chair, and Finance Chair. If any of these persons cannot in good faith sign such a form, they must attach a signed statement explaining the reason(s). When the completed form is received by the District Superintendent with all other required signatures and/or statements, the District Superintendent will also sign the document or provide a signed statement.

The Church Council 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 ¶2549.3(a) closure as a United Methodist Church. A copy of the official minutes from the church council meeting during which the vote was taken requesting the District Superintendent to call a church conference shall be shared with the District Superintendent and Alabama-West Florida Trustees. The minutes

shall include the total number of possible church council votes, how many were present, and how many voted for and against the motion.

If a church council considers a motion to request a church conference vote and the motion fails to receive a majority vote, that local church must wait at least twelve months and restart the discernment process from the beginning if they wish to pursue closure as a United Methodist Church in the future.

#### (4) Conference Trustees Review

Prior to the District Superintendent's calling a church conference, the Trustees will review all the required documentation, assessments, and other provided information. Any known potential problem areas regarding closure as a United Methodist Church will be provided to both the church and the District Superintendent at this time.

#### (5) District Superintendent Decision to Call Church Conference

Before calling a church conference, the District Superintendent shall confirm that the conference Trustees have reviewed the church's documents and request for a church conference, and that any problems identified by the conference trustees have been resolved.

#### (6) Church Conference and Vote

The church conference shall be conducted in accordance with ¶248. 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 for closure as a United Methodist Church from The United Methodist Church must be approved by a two-thirds of (2/3) majority vote of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference. The notice of church conference must be sent to all professing member households and must include the reason for the Church Conference, the request for closure as a United Methodist Church, adopted by the church council that will be voted on, and an explanation of the decision being made at the Church Conference, which will be provided by the District Superintendent.

7. If two-thirds (2/3) majority of the professing members of the local church present at the church conference vote to close as a United Methodist Church under the terms of this policy, then the Annual Conference Board of Trustees in accordance with paragraph 2549.3(a) of the Discipline will enter into an agreement for the purchase and sale of the Property of Local Church to a new church to be formed by the members at the price and on the terms set out in said agreement.

8. Expiration. While Paragraph 2549.3(a) continues in The United Methodist Book of Discipline, this policy will discontinue after the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference adjourns in 2025.