



First United Methodist Church

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Dear FUMC Monticello,

I wrote my first letter to you regarding the state of the United Methodist Church some two years ago. Since that time, I have addressed the issue two more times. The most recent was when a decision came down from General Conference to remove prohibitive language from the Book of Discipline.

It is no secret that tensions within The United Methodist Church are at an all-time high. Since 1972, shortly after the formation of the church, we have been embroiled in denominational struggles around the issues of human sexuality, the centrality of Christ, and the interpretation of Scripture. In 2016 we reached a tipping point. While watching General Conference via livestream, I witnessed what I was sure to be the demise of the church. We were able to pull ourselves together and agreed to meet in a *special called session* of General Conference in 2019. Even though a vote was taken and decisions made, this did not solve the impasse.

After the 2019 called session of General Conference failed to solve this issue, a group of both progressive and conservative representatives came together to propose a new piece of legislation to help end the almost 50 years of fracture within the larger church. This piece of legislation is called "Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation and Restructuring."

This piece of legislation would allow those churches, pastors, and annual conferences who were unhappy with the current church to leave and either form their own denomination or join another of their choosing. This legislation had the backing of traditionalist, centrist, and progressive groups within the church. General Conference delegates that were elected at their respective 2019 Annual Conferences were supposed to take up this legislation and vote one way or the other. There were many meetings held about this matter. One was held right here at FUMC Monticello. I remember attending that meeting with a delegation from the Crossett Church while I was pastor there.

As we all know, in March of 2020, the world experienced a global pandemic that stopped life as we know it in its tracks. Everyone within The United Methodist Church was waiting to see what would happen at our next General Conference.

With the delay of yet another General Conference, and those who first supported the protocol pulling their support, about 25% who were frustrated with the impasse decided to take the step to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church. This was a long and difficult process that **could not be led by clergy** and required meetings, votes, and payment of financial commitments to the annual conference.

In light of recent General Conference decisions, you may be asking why we at FUMC Monticello did not have any meetings or make any decisions about disaffiliation or what could occur at General Conference.

First, let me say that the decisions at General Conference took me by surprise. As I stated earlier, this is a debate that has been going on for more than 50 years. Each time that it would come up, it would be solidly voted down. I had no reason to believe that this year would any different. In fact, up until now, the stance of The United Methodist Church has been the same for my whole lifetime.

When I was appointed to serve here in January of 2021, we were right in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were \$70,000 behind our budget, and we had many of our families leave the church for other churches or no church at all. This was a very fragile time in the life of our church, and to have a conversation about something that had not changed, could potentially further divide us. Because of this, I felt this would not be the right course of action. Although we are in a better position now, it has taken us this long to get here.

During this time, there were very few people talking about disaffiliation or our need to do something different. I also had many people thanking me that our church leadership was not taking steps that were splitting the churches of their family members or other churches that they either knew or loved.

Since General Conference, we at FUMC Monticello have taken steps granted to us by holding a town hall meeting, producing a congregational wide survey, and issuing policy statements on how we collectively feel about this matter.

I, like many of you, do not agree with the changes brought forth at General Conference. Because of this, I too am in a period of discernment. I am not sure what the future holds for any of us, but I am reminded of the final words of John Wesley as he was on his deathbed. With his friends and family gathered around, he spoke with confidence these words: "The best of all is, God is with us." This is what I am clinging to in these uncertain times.

I have been in The United Methodist Church for soon to be fifty-three years. Twenty-eight of those have been as clergy. My life is wrapped up in The United Methodist Church. This is my church. I truly want what is best for it and for the people who worship here. Please pray for me as I pray for you, and I know that God will see us through.

Blessings,

Bryan