

Summary of October 3, 2022, Prayer and Discernment Team Meeting

Present for the meeting were: Dale Cohen, Will Beadle, Al Ford, Kathy Gamble, Lisa Keys-Mathews, Mak Knowlden, Katy Beth Carr, Ann Lyndon, Terry Buchanan, Paula Michael Calvin Durham, Lindsey Mussleman Davis.

Dale Cohen opened the meeting with prayer. Katy Beth Carr chaired the meeting. A devotional by Katy Beth Carr followed utilizing lesson of Nathaniel from John 1. She encouraged us to move past fear and skepticism with others as this hinders us from recognizing the value in others. We must be willing to encounter the grace of God in unusual places and leave assumptions at the door.

Following this, a discussion took place as to impressions from the Congregational Meeting on September 25, 2022. Team members shared observations, both positive and negative from the meeting. Some expressed concern about anger shown by some members, and the lack of participation by younger members. The team discussed the importance of providing communication and truthful information to all in the congregation as, without knowledge, often comes fear. This underscores the need for information and knowledge of the issues at hand which have brought us to the discernment process. Participation by as many members as is possible from the congregation is crucial to the success of the discernment process.

Concerns and fears expressed to various team members about the process were also shared as well. Discussion included recognizing concerns of all age groups within the congregation. In the discussion, it was noted at the meeting of September 25 that several members questioned why the process was even needed, in other words, "Why are we here?".

Other discussion included while there is a need for large meetings, it is sometimes hard to keep meetings on track. Although the September 25 meeting was to have been an informational meeting, questions from the congregation varied from that agenda. Some concern was expressed about the ability to hear with the acoustics in McDowell Hall. Other concerns included attendees being concerned about decisions being made without representation and without fully understanding what choices were available.

Katy Beth lead the discussion of the proposed Discernment Plan Discussion followed as to the best way to disseminate information to the congregation to assure that everyone is fully apprised of information as to discernment. Suggestions were made to email, regular mail, post on FUMC website, print in the midweek Messenger, the Church bulletin and other potential options. The team recommended that literature be available to show the pros and cons of disaffiliation including issues of finance, as well as policy. Educating the congregation as to all issues is crucial to assure that everyone has as much information as is possible as to matters related to the discernment process.

The team discussed inviting external speakers to discuss various denominational options such as GMA, WCA, and Free Methodist. Additional meetings could include large group meetings where speakers would provide information after which the large group is broken into small groups

so that all congregants would have an opportunity to be heard, not just the loudest, but the soft voices as well.

The team discussed inviting speakers for Sunday school classes. Speakers at any of the aforementioned could include external speakers, some lay leaders as well as some ministers.

The team expressed concerns about misinformation being spread as well as fear mongering which is divisive and undermines the discernment process. All team members were encouraged to discourage any efforts to spread misinformation and fear mongering.

Candid conversation followed as to concerns and about transparency in the discernment process. Discussion included the importance of the process being transparent and everyone have the opportunity to have as much information as is possible. Love for FUMC and proceeding in the best interests of the church in the discernment process remains key. Being open-minded throughout the process is also a crucial factor. The congregation needs to understand that there has been no predetermination as to the end result of the discernment process. Conversation also included concerns expressed to and by team members about the Book of Discipline and some members expression of a lack of trust in the utilization of the Book of Discipline by the Bishop and General Conference. Some expressed they had been told that discernment was “politics” within United Methodist Church and it was creating disunity and ranker among UMC congregations. Team members expressed the importance of the process being fair and the importance of “both sides” being advised and looking to leadership in the process.

The need for closure and the path to closure was discussed. Several team members expressed support for a congregational vote to bring closure. Discussion was had as to a vote versus consensus through the discernment process.

Discussion included concerns with the UMC, lack of accountability and rules in the Book of Discipline not being followed. Historical background as to this was given dating back to the 1939 decision to have the North and South jurisdictions of the Methodist Church.

Information was also provided as to the current North Alabama Conference and that the possibility, not certainty, of a new Bishop being assigned to the North Alabama Conference in December 2022.

Team members indicated part of the beauty of Methodism is that while congregants may view some issues differently, they could still worship together as a congregation. The team discuss that the issue leading to disaffiliation was larger than just human sexuality. Some concern was expressed that while there had not been changes to the Book of Discipline as to human sexuality, if there are, what social issues might be next. Analogies were drawn, however, by other team members as to prior divisive issues topics such as segregation and women, yet Methodism prevailed.

Discussion was also had as to how the trust clause developed through John Wesley in the late 1700s and continues today.

Discussion also included questioning as to why some members have ceased attending and supporting the church, yet have not given up their membership at FUMC. The importance of members fulfilling their obligations as members with their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness was emphasized.

The team discussed utilizing a congregational survey in the course of discernment. Getting the survey to all of the congregation and the best methods were also addressed. The consensus was to use several methods to assure that all members have an opportunity to participate. The form of the questions, open-ended versus a more multiple-choice format was discussed. All members agreed to submit questions suggested for the survey by the next meeting. Questions will be discussed and circulated among the team.

Financial costs of disaffiliation were discussed.

Fairness, communication and transparency were reiterated as necessary for the discernment process to be successful. All team members are committed to this.

Dale closed with prayer.

The next meeting will take place on October 19, 2022 at 7:00 PM.