



# BEGINNING AGAIN

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A guide for remaining in  
The United Methodist Church

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This guide was originally created for the Florida and Western North Carolina Annual Conferences of The United Methodist Church. It has been edited for inclusion on [UMC.org/committed](https://www.UMC.org/committed).

# Introduction

It's said that every morning, Francis of Assisi would face the rising sun, raise his hands and exclaim, "Today I begin with God." He reflected the spirit of followers of Christ, who is always ahead of us (Matthew 13:52), leading us into new discoveries. That's why the image of the Christian life is a journey, not a destination. As Thomas Merton put it, we are "beginners all our days."<sup>1</sup>

Today, Jesus is leading us into another new awakening. It is an axial age for the world and a time of renewal for the Church. A fresh wind of the Spirit is blowing, and God is calling us to raise our sails and journey in new ways and in new directions.<sup>2</sup>

This spirit of adventure is in our Wesleyan DNA. The early Methodist movement reached the marginalized, renewed the Church, and reformed the nation through fresh expressions of Christian faith. As United Methodists, we are heirs of this spirit.

But new awakenings do not occur without challenges. They are times of disorder, moving us from the previous order to an emerging reorder.<sup>3</sup> Theologically, Paul called it a new creation, made possible as old things pass away so that new things can come (2 Corinthians 5:17). He compared the experience to labor pains which precede Christ being formed in us (Galatians 4:19).

A new United Methodist Church (UMC) is emerging. It is a new-wineskin expression of the Body of Christ (Matthew 9:14-17), a kingdom-of-God manifestation that brings forth treasures old and new (Matthew 13:52). In the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, "A Charge to Keep," the emerging UMC will respond to God's call "to serve the present age."

**This guide is offered to help you remain United Methodist, and to do so with purpose, meaning and joy.** It is intentionally in outline form, giving you enough information on which to act, but leaving enough room for context and creativity. There is no one-size-fits-all paradigm, but there are useful practices that we can all apply to our unique situations.

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1 Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Image Books, 1971), 37

2 Steve Harper, *Fresh Wind Blowing* (Cascade Books, 2013)

3 Richard Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern* (Franciscan Media, 2020)

# What If My Church Disaffiliates?

In one way or another, every congregation in The United Methodist Church will decide whether to stay in the denomination or leave it. If your church is moving toward disaffiliation, there are things to do before the vote is taken, when it is taken and after it is taken.

Here are steps to take during each phase of the process.

## BEFORE THE VOTE IS TAKEN

- 1 Designate someone to communicate with those who want to remain United Methodist.
- 2 Develop an initial email contact list of these individuals and continue to update it.
- 3 Let outside helpers<sup>4</sup> know that you have created a group committed to remaining UMC.
- 4 Provide occasional email updates about what's happening (news, communications from your annual conference, upcoming gathering dates, etc.).
- 5 See to it that all options (to remain UMC or not) are accurately and fairly represented in announcements, presentations and gatherings. If you find this is not taking place, speak to persons in leadership to ensure the issue is corrected and addressed properly going forward.
- 6 Dispel rumors and untruths with facts.
- 7 Do what you can to resist disaffiliation with a good spirit (Ephesians 4:13).

## WHEN THE VOTE IS TAKEN

- 1 Show up and vote, so the record clearly shows how many want to remain in The UMC.
- 2 Designate someone to clearly and thoughtfully make the case for remaining.
- 3 If the vote is in favor of disaffiliation, at the end of the meeting, have someone say, "Will those who voted to remain in The UMC meet me here for a brief meeting?"
- 4 If any new people join your gathering, add them to your email list.
- 5 Announce a first "Beginning Again" meeting.<sup>5</sup>

## AFTER THE VOTE IS TAKEN

- 1 Let your outside helpers know that you will commence "Beginning Again" meetings.
- 2 Send a note to your email list inviting everyone to the first meeting.

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<sup>4</sup> This could be your District Superintendent, someone in the annual conference office, a [support ministry](#), or a combination of these helpers.

<sup>5</sup> Even when a congregation votes to disaffiliate, it does not take effect immediately. You have time to conduct a series of "Beginning Again" meetings. The next section of this guide supports you as you do this.

# Beginning Again

If your church votes to disaffiliate, it will mean the loss of many things you have held dear. The challenge will be to move beyond the loss and commence the process of “beginning again.”

Henri Nouwen described the challenge this way, “Every time there are losses there are choices to be made. You either choose to live your losses as passages to anger, blame, hatred, depression, and resentment, or you choose to let these losses be passages into to something new, something wider and deeper. The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to greater life and freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

The “Beginning Again” process is one rooted in the belief that “God is with us” and doing a new thing among us (Isaiah 43:19). With respect to The United Methodist Church, it is trusting that God is at work to make a new wineskin to hold and pour out the wine of the Gospel. “Beginning Again” is your commitment to be part of the emerging UMC.<sup>7</sup>

To begin, you will need to determine the number of times you need to gather. The aim of your initial meetings is threefold: (1) to discover your vision, (2) to declare your intentions, and (3) to develop your means for remaining in The UMC.

Before digging into these three items, take a moment to review a few general reminders:

- Keep the worship/work pattern going. We find light and life at the nexus of the vertical (worship) and horizontal (work). As William Temple put it, “Worship is the central act of the people of God.” We do our work best as a response to God's work in, among and through us. Plan worship experiences that include singing, praying and encouraging devotionals that are rooted in Scripture and tradition.
- At each meeting, be sure your email list is updated. Effective communication is crucial in the “Beginning Again” journey.
- Designate someone to record every response. Even if some ideas are not immediately enacted, they may become extremely helpful and relevant later. Some groups write responses on a whiteboard and take a picture of it to preserve the input. Capturing specific input is a way to demonstrate that every person's ideas matter. Including pauses and time for quiet reflection also honors comments and gives them time to sink in.

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved* (Image Books, 2017), reading for November 9<sup>th</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The threefold paradigm (vision, intention, means) is one designed by Richard Foster and the Renovaré ministry. It is the structure for the *Life With God Bible* (Harper, 2005), which you may find to be a useful resource.

# Beginning Again | Continued

## DISCOVER THE VISION

The following questions will help you envision the kind of group you want to be.

- 1 What do you value in your faith?
- 2 How did your congregation help you strengthen and live those values?
- 3 What aspects of Methodism are most meaningful to you?
- 4 How did your congregation help you strengthen and live those aspects?
- 5 What did you not find in your congregation that you had hoped to find?
- 6 What needs in your community are the most pressing right now?
- 7 Who are the unreached people in your area?
- 8 When you think of being a “loving fellowship,” what comes to mind?

## DECLARE YOUR INTENTIONS

- 1 What priorities do you choose as you form your new group?  
Group the priorities in these categories:
  - Life together (for the group)
  - Life for others (for the community)
  - Life for all (for the world)
- 2 Turn your priorities into a mission statement, such as: “God being our helper, we intend to become a group that \_\_\_\_\_.”

## DEVELOP YOUR MEANS

- 1 What form will our group take?<sup>8</sup>
- 2 Where shall we meet? When and how often?
- 3 How shall we be present in our community?
- 4 What will we do to be connected to the emerging UMC?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Epworth Group model is one option; see page 6.

<sup>9</sup> Consult with your helpers, defined on page 3, to learn ways of being connected.

# What About My UMC Membership?

In the event your church chooses to disaffiliate, you should be aware that upon approval of that disaffiliation at the next annual conference meeting, all persons on your church's membership roll at that time will no longer be members of The UMC. You must take action to remain a member of The United Methodist Church.

No matter what form your group takes, you will need to maintain your UMC membership. You have a variety of ways to do this. Follow the path that is best for you.

## CONSIDER THESE OPTIONS:

- 1 Transfer your membership to a nearby congregation that is remaining in The UMC. You should do this before your annual conference officially approves the disaffiliation of your congregation.
- 2 If there is no nearby church remaining in The UMC, check with your District Superintendent to find your next-best option. Annual conferences have developed different ways for you to preserve your membership. Learning more about churches via [Find-A-Church](#) might also prove to be helpful.
- 3 If neither of the previous suggestions are suitable solutions, contact [your Annual Conference](#) to explore further options. There are several, but they are utilized on a case-by-case basis.

## HERE'S THE BOTTOM LINE:

You can and will remain a member of The United Methodist Church if that is your desire, but you need to be proactive to see that it happens.

# Epworth Groups

In the "Beginning Again" process, you are led to the point of deciding what kind of group you want to be. It can take many forms.

On the following page, you'll find a model for becoming an "Epworth Group." John Wesley said that his mother's kitchen in Epworth was "the cradle of Methodism." Hence the name "Epworth Group" as you begin again.

The focus of Epworth Groups is twofold: (1) to hold together those whose church has disaffiliated (or closed), leaving them "homeless," and (2) to foster life together through spiritual formation in the Wesleyan tradition.

# Epworth Groups | Continued

The resources section of this guide will help you discover materials to use in your meetings.

The meeting itself unfolds as outlined below, with any adaptations you may design to make your group more meaningful.

<b>10 MINUTES</b>	Gathering, welcome, opening prayer
<b>20 MINUTES</b>	Program study
<b>20 MINUTES</b>	Group discussion**
<b>10 MINUTES</b>	Closing, prayer, announcement of next meeting

Group discussion should take place in the way that's best for your unique group. It is important to be clear that attentive listening is a form of participation; no one should be required or feel pressured to speak. Additionally, the group leader should "shepherd" the discussion so that no one (or a few) dominates the conversation. One way to do this is to respond to an over-zealous speaker by saying, "It is clear this session is really important for you. That's great. But before we further unpack this, let's see what others may want to share about what's important to them."

**\*\*A DISCUSSION SCENARIO MIGHT BE A CYCLE OF QUESTIONS THAT MOVES ALONG THIS PATH:**

- 1 What was "the big idea" you got from this session?
- 2 Why was it important for you to have that idea now?
- 3 How might you apply it to your life?
- 4 How might you express it for the good of someone else?



# Resources

Once you have completed the “Beginning Again” process, you will want to continue meeting and using resources that suit your mission. Because the emerging UMC is rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, begin with meetings that connect you with this tradition. Abingdon Press (through [Amplify Media](#)) has published a four-volume study for this purpose.

## THE FOUR VOLUMES INCLUDE:

- 1 *Five Marks of a Methodist* by Steve Harper
- 2 *Three Simple Rules* by Rueben Job
- 3 *Five Means of Grace* by Elaine Heath
- 4 *One Faithful Promise* by Magrey deVega

In addition to the books, there are additional (but not required) accompanying videos, a leader's guide and a participant guide.

When your group has finished this study journey, you will be ready to move ahead with further resources from [Amplify Media](#). They have thousands of resources from which to choose.

We also recommend utilizing resources available from [The Upper Room](#) and from [Renovaré](#).

The helpers you have been in touch with throughout the “Beginning Again” experience will likely have other resource suggestions. You can also review the following section of this guide to see what others have to offer.

# Directory

Throughout this guide, the idea that “you are not alone” has been emphasized. It is true! The United Methodist Church is a connectional church. But it does not feel that way when we are in the throes of disaffiliation. Here are contacts and ministries who are ready to walk with you as you remain in The UMC.

- 1 Your annual conference office. Connect with those who oversee church development, church planting, the Fresh Expressions movement, etc. These go by different names in particular annual conferences, but each one has one or more staff persons who oversee these efforts. Some even have staff people who are focused on start-up efforts for those who want to remain in The UMC after their congregations disaffiliate. Find contact information for your annual conference in the [directory on UMC.org](#).
- 2 Your District Superintendent. This person has partnered with you throughout the disaffiliation experience. Continue turning to them for guidance.
- 3 Support Ministries. In addition to those in [your annual conference](#), here are a few others to explore:
  - The United Methodist Church ([UMC.org](#) & [UMC.org/committed](#))
  - #BeUMC ([UMC.org/BeUMC](#))
  - Discipleship Ministries ([UMCdiscipleship.org](#))
  - Fresh Expressions UM, a [subset of Discipleship Ministries](#)
  - Resource UMC ([ResourceUMC.org](#))



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