

Clarification of the United Methodist Book of Discipline regarding a Retired Pastor's* Relationship to the Local Church, the District, the Annual Conference, and the United Methodist Church

*from the North Texas Annual Conference Resident Bishop and Cabinet
April 15, 2023*

*In this document, retired pastor refers to retired elders, deacons and associate members. Retired local pastors will be addressed in a separate document.

Confession: We, leaders in the United Methodist Church, have not been diligent in our continuing connection to our retired pastors. While retired pastors are no longer under itineracy of appointments, they remain UMC clergy with a change of status. The Book of Discipline is clear that each retired pastor must remain connected to a local church, a district (and, therefore, under the care and supervision of a district superintendent), and an annual conference (and, therefore, under the leadership and ultimate supervision of the resident bishop). These are connections that have been tended to inconsistently, leaving many retired United Methodist clergy feeling disconnected in a connectional system. At the same time the emergence of a new Wesleyan movement prompts the need to clarify the relationship between clergy members and pastoral ministry beyond the UMC. To that end, we desire to strengthen this part of our connectional system.

Charge Conference: Retired clergy members are required to connect to a charge conference. This is one of the most basic and essential components of our connectional life. The pastor leading that congregation, the members of that congregation and the retired clergyperson are encouraged to live out the “*one anothers*” expressed throughout the scriptures in the local church (see John 13:34; Romans 12:10, 16; Galatians 6:2; Colossians 3:13). Paragraph 357.5 instructs retired clergy persons to submit an annual report to the charge conference providing an account to the church and to the District Superintendent of the expressions of pastoral ministry provided during the year. Retired clergy members have a seat in the charge conference and are voting members unless otherwise restricted by the Book of Discipline on a given matter. Thus, retired clergy members continue to be active in the connection of the local United Methodist Church.

District Conference: Retired clergy members are members of the district to which the local church is connected. Again, there is reciprocity as the clergy person receives reports regarding the direction and ministry of the district, elects leaders, approves budgets, and serves on district boards and committees as requested and the clergy person receives the benefits of community with the district superintendent and other leaders in the district. Thus, retired clergy members continue to be active in the connection at the district level.

Annual Conference: Retired clergy members are voting members of the Annual Conference. They continue to participate in shaping the ministry and direction of the Annual Conference by participating in the discussions, deliberations, and determinations of this basic body of the connection. The session of the Annual Conference is where retired members benefit from reunion, revival, and renewal of a strong connection. Thus, retired clergy members continue to be active in the connection at the annual conference level.

Accountability and Support: Accountability and support are key components inextricably bound together in the connection of the United Methodist Church. This is especially true regarding clergy members. From the time of exploring candidacy throughout our earthly life, there is someone to whom this person called to representative ministry is connectionally accountable and who has the responsibility of supporting the candidate and subsequent clergy person. These persons are pastors, mentors, district superintendents and bishops. This continues in retirement. Retired clergy persons are accountable to the resident bishop of the Annual Conference. As such, they are eligible to receive an appointment when requested by the bishop and cabinet. However, all expressions of pastoral ministry of a United Methodist clergy member are under the authority of the resident bishop. ¶ 344.1.d and ¶ 345 do allow for a United Methodist pastor to serve in a ministerial capacity in another denomination recognized by the United Methodist Church, but such service is under the direction of the bishop and the Board of Ordained ministry.

The Current Situation: Retired clergy members of the North Texas Annual Conference are not to serve in a ministerial capacity, whether paid or unpaid, outside of The United Methodist Church without the expressed and written permission of the resident bishop. To do so would indicate that the pastor has withdrawn from ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church according to

¶ 360. If the clergy member does not initiate a withdrawal and continues to serve in a pastoral capacity outside of the United Methodist Church, such conduct is tantamount to a disavowal of the United Methodist bishop's authority to make and fix all pastoral appointments and of the clergy member's continued amenability to the bishop, the Discipline, and the annual conference. Therefore, once an ordained United Methodist clergyperson, whether active or retired, purports to serve as pastor of a disaffiliated and now non-United Methodist local church, without having been appointed to that post by the bishop, they have committed the chargeable offense of disobedience to the order and discipline of The United Methodist Church in regard to the provisions outlined above and in doing so, under the reasoning applied in Judicial Council Decision 696, they may be deemed to have terminated their clergy membership in the annual conference as a matter of church law.

Next steps for all retired clergy:

- Visit with the pastor of the United Methodist Church to which you wish to connect or continue to connect and communicate your charge conference connection to the District Superintendent. A reminder: membership vows affirm support of the local church with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. While retired clergy are members of the North Texas Annual Conference, the expectation remains for them to fulfill these membership vows in the support of their local church. Connecting with a charge conference assumes the five-fold commitment referenced above.
- Submit an annual report to your charge conference according to ¶ 357.5
- If you are serving in a ministerial capacity outside of The United Methodist Church without the expressed and written permission of the resident bishop,
 - Discontinue this relationship immediately, or
 - Visit with your district superintendent to move toward a request for expressed and written permission from the resident bishop, or
 - Initiate a withdrawal from the UMC by contacting your District Superintendent.

REFERENCES

¶ **357.5. Charge Conference Membership**—a) All retired clergy members who are not appointed as pastors of a charge, after consultation with the pastor and the district superintendent, shall have a seat in the charge

conference and all the privileges of membership in the church where they elect to hold such membership except as set forth in the Discipline. They shall report to the charge conference and to the pastor all marriages performed, baptisms administered, and other pastoral functions. If they reside outside the bounds of the annual conference where membership is held, they shall forward annually to the charge conference where membership is held a report of their Christian and ministerial conduct, signed by the district superintendent or the pastor of the affiliate charge conference where they reside.

¶ 357.6. Appointment of Retired Ordained Ministers—A retired ordained minister shall be eligible to receive an appointment (in the UMC) when requested by the bishop and cabinet.

¶ 344.1.d (in part) d) Elders, associate members, and those licensed for pastoral ministry may receive appointments beyond the ministry usually extended through the local United Methodist church and other institutions listed above in a) and b) when considered by the bishop and the annual conference Board of Ordained Ministry to be a true extension of the Christian ministry of the Church. They may be appointed to pastoral ministry in other Christian denominations at the request of appropriate judicatory officers of that denomination. These ministries shall be initiated in missional response to the needs of persons in special circumstances and unique situations and shall reflect the commitment of the clergy to intentional fulfillment of their ordination vows to Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service.

¶ 345. United Methodist clergy members in full connection may be appointed annually to churches of other Christian denominations or to ecumenical shared ministries. Persons in these appointments remain in the itineracy and shall be accountable to the annual conference. Their effectiveness shall be evaluated in the context of the specific setting in which their ministry is performed. (See ¶ 344.1d.)

Judicial Council Decision 696 can be found at:

<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/the-legality-of-holding-membership-in-two-denominations-simultaneously>