

Dear church family,

As a church, we have the opportunity to choose our future affiliation by voting in person at our called church conference on Sunday, September 25<sup>th</sup> at 7:00pm. You can find out more about our discernment process, the GMC, and the UMC by visiting the AUMC website. As one of your pastors, I also wanted to share my thoughts and feelings on the matter.

As an infant, I was baptized in the United Methodist Church. I was also confirmed, married, called into ministry, and ordained in the United Methodist Church. My mother and her mother and generations before are Methodist. I never thought I would leave the United Methodist Church. However, after a time of research and discernment, I have come to the heartbreaking conclusion that the United Methodist Church has left me and now I must change to stay the same.

When I began seminary and became a certified candidate for ministry, I knew there was ambiguity around what the UMC would look like, or if it would even still be the UMC when I reached the time for ordination. I trusted that God would lead me down His chosen path and have a place of service for me to answer my calling to serve.

For me, that calling is to strengthen Christian families through the local church. I first answered that call by leaving my career in higher education and serving as the Children's Director of AUMC. I thought that would do it. God called me a little further to enter a certification program for Christian education and I thought that would do it. Then God called me a little further to begin seminary and seek to become an ordained Deacon in the UMC, giving my life in service to God and the church. Now, I feel God calling me to once again, go a little further and help shape a new expression of Methodism as an Elder in the Global Methodist Church. I know that this will enable me to preserve the faith I grew up in for the children that I was called to serve. This is how I am being faithful to the call that God has placed on my life.

My faith and my beliefs that I vowed to uphold have not changed, and yet the UMC is changing. So again, I find I must change to stay the same.

AUMC is a special place. As a congregation, you have nurtured me, allowed me to grow, and trusted me to lead your children. I love the people of this church and know you all to be committed disciples of Christ, divine son of God the Father. We have always been a community that has placed our commitment to local mission and discipleship above politics. I believe that whatever the result of our vote on September 25<sup>th</sup>, this will remain true. The people you have loved, worked, and worshipped alongside for years will not change.

I would love nothing more than to continue to be your pastor as long as our leadership allows me to do so. I am committed to staying and helping to unify our congregation in whatever direction you choose for as long as I can. However, I see the big tent of the continuing UMC growing too scattered to be sustainable. The doctrine of a church provides unity and gives direction to its life. Without accountability to that agreed doctrine by a covenant community, the church loses its centrality and moves away from the Wesleyan connectional system I hold so dear. I think it is a question of when, not if, our own jurisdiction and annual conference will become representative of the unraveling I see occurring in other areas of the country. At that point, should AUMC choose to stay and adopt beliefs and practices inconsistent with my theology, I would need to exit the continuing UMC despite my deep love for this congregation.

This is breaking my heart, and I know it is breaking yours. But I am reminded that once mended, objects are often stronger at the broken places. The prophet Jeremiah tells us in 18:4-6, "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?" declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Like a jar of clay, we are being shaped by God, and that is not always comfortable, but I trust in the one who called me and continues to call me. I pray that we can be a witness of Christ's love by speaking to one another with kindness and respect in the months ahead, and praying blessings upon one another no matter the outcome of our discernment.

Your sister in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leigh-Anne Williams". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'L'.

Rev. Leigh-Anne Williams