



**Trinity United Methodist Church
Discernment Team Report and Recommendation
Approved by the Administrative Board (63-3)—November 14, 2022**

*“And this is my prayer:
that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,
so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”*
Philippians 1:9-10 (NIV)

SUMMARY

The Discernment Team of Trinity United Methodist Church was organized in January 2022. The goal of the team was to discern God’s will for Trinity as it moves through this season of disagreement and separation within the United Methodist Church (“UMC”). The Discernment Team studied scripture and resource material, researched issues associated with disaffiliation, conducted informational and listening sessions with members of Trinity (including the Administrative Board), and held numerous meetings of the Committee for prayer and discussion.

The Discernment Team has prepared this report on our process, our observations, and the factors and considerations that led to our recommendation. **The Discernment Team unanimously recommends that Trinity remain a local church within the United Methodist Church.**

OUR METHODIST CONNECTION

The United Methodist Church became a denomination in 1968, as the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church united. It is a global denomination consisting of 131 Annual Conferences and over 12 million people. While originally founded as a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Trinity has been a part of this main branch of Methodism in one way or another for our entire history. Trinity is a member of the North Alabama Conference (“NAC”) of the UMC, which is a part of the U.S. Southeastern Jurisdiction.

The NAC is made up of over 600 churches and over 100,000 members across north Alabama. Trinity is a member of the South Central District, which consists of 46 churches and over 23,000 members. Trinity is one of the largest churches in the NAC, both in terms of membership and operating budget.

Globally, the United Methodist Church is in mission to 136 countries across the world, with 677 missionaries, 125,000 volunteers in mission, and 550 refugee and relief workers. The UMC sponsors 52 hospitals and health care facilities, and 92 colleges and universities. The UMC provides an average of 6.3 billion dollars in generosity and outreach annually. It is estimated that the UMC, as a denomination, keeps 2,000,000 children alive each day.

Through Trinity's connection to the United Methodist Committee on Relief ("UMCOR"), we have helped to provide significant assistance to those in need across the world. For example, UMCOR has provided more than 23 million dollars to assist an estimated 380,000 Ukrainians with food, shelter, medical assistance, and transportation. The recent "Abundant Health" campaign coordinated a global initiative to positively impact the health of a million children around the world. While the UMC is certainly not without its shortcomings, the global impact of our denomination in the name of Jesus Christ continues to be remarkable.

Within the North Alabama Annual Conference, our connection has manifested itself in Camp Sumatanga Conference and Retreat Center, Embrace Alabama Kids (formerly known as the United Methodist Children's Home of Alabama and West Florida), Methodist Homes of Alabama and West Alabama (focusing on eldercare), \$1,000,000 raised for Imagine No Malaria, Superannuate Homes, Birmingham-Southern College, and our Wesley Foundations.

As a congregation within the United Methodist Church, Trinity has a long history of missional impact in our community. In his last words, Jesus told his disciples to go and make disciples and to teach all nations "to observe all that I have commanded you." It is the belief of the Discernment Team that the focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ, and continuing our outreach ministry to our neighbors in need, is vital to how we understand our identity and mission as a church. Our emphasis on serving Jesus Christ is critical to our members, and continuing to expand these efforts in the future is extremely important to our congregation. Our recommendation to remain in the UMC reflects these priorities and our members' desire to continue Trinity's support of our connectional ministry around the world.

FORMATION OF DISCERNMENT TEAM

In 2021, as it became more clear that the UMC was going to be involved in a division that primarily centered around the full inclusion of LGBTQ members, Trinity's clergy and lay leadership called on the church to undertake a laity-led discernment effort, to seek God's will for our future. Drawing from a model that Brentwood (TN) United Methodist Church had recently utilized, Trinity's clergy selected twelve people to

serve on a Discernment Team (eleven lay members plus the Senior Pastor). Trinity's Associate Pastor, Amy DeWitte, served as a Spiritual Advisor for the group.

The eleven lay members were selected based on their gift of discernment, their involvement with the various ministries at Trinity, and their personal life experiences. The team represents a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives, and accurately captures much of Trinity's theological diversity. Although these members may have previously known each other through their involvement in various Trinity activities, in most cases they had not had an opportunity to connect personally. Over the past year, this group has established tremendous trust in and respect for one another, allowing them to have frank and honest discussions about these sensitive topics.

DISCERNMENT TEAM FOCUS, GOAL, AND ACTIVITIES

The team's focus was to discern God's will for Trinity as it moves through this difficult season in the life of our denomination, and fittingly, we began with studying the nature of spiritual discernment itself. Believing this work to be about more than simply navigating the current crisis, the larger question we asked was: "How can Trinity best continue to faithfully respond to our God-given call to be the body of Christ in our community?"

The team has met ten times this year: January 22, February 13, March 20, April 10, May 1, May 15, July 17, October 2, October 16, and November 6.

Two of the specific denominational issues that were discussed were (1) same-sex marriage performed by our clergy and/or in our church building and (2) the ordination of otherwise qualified LGBTQ persons to Methodist ministry, both of which are currently prohibited under the *Book of Discipline*. It's important to acknowledge that no individual church, pastor, or annual conference can alter the *Book of Discipline*. The team was also not discussing who is welcome in our church, as the members of the Discernment Team feel strongly that Trinity should be welcoming to all people. Nor was the team assembled to make a decision for Trinity; instead, our task was to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, listen to our church family, and develop a recommendation to present to the Administrative Board.

Accordingly, the Discernment Team is not in a place to make any recommendation with regard to Trinity's policies relative to same-sex marriage performed by our clergy in our church building, or the ordination of LGBTQ persons to Methodist ministry. Trinity and its pastors have been faithful to the *Book of Discipline*, and the Discernment Team believes that we should continue to do so.

The Discernment Team conducted its meetings and discussions with these three thoughts in mind:

1. We need to approach this process with an open mind concerning how long this discernment effort might last. We are working on God's time now, not ours.
2. We should take a fresh, clean approach to the Scriptures that are related to the issues that are before us. True discernment requires that we "start over" in pursuit of the Holy Spirit. Preconceived notions or closed hearts will not allow for the completion of a Spirit-led process.
3. All of the opinions and comments of the Discernment Team members are valuable as we move into this process. Like Trinity, our team is comprised of members who are very different - which is one of our strengths.

Although the Discernment Team did not initially establish a definitive timetable for the completion of its work, it did follow a process that produced these steps:

1. Hold regular team meetings to provide the members with an opportunity to individually and collectively undertake a discernment process.
2. Establish a Discernment Team email address to receive input from any Trinity member wishing to give it.
3. Share the team's work with the church through the Wednesday night series that was held during September 2022.
4. Hold open listening sessions with the church during October 2022.
5. Prepare its report to submit to the Administrative Board for its consideration.

In addition to the Bible, the team utilized numerous reference materials, videos, and interviews, including four reference books designed to facilitate discussion and provide insight from a variety of perspectives:

- *Discernment* by Henri Nouwen
- *Scripture, Ethics & the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* by Karen Keen
- *For the Body* by Timothy Tennent
- *Living Faithfully - Human Sexuality and the United Methodist Church* by four different authors

These four books did an excellent job of capturing how people of good will and strong faith can come to different conclusions on matters of substance. The heart of our work is captured in these words from Henri Nouwen: "Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God. We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives, loses its power over us. Our desire to be successful, well liked, and influential becomes increasingly less important as we come closer to God's heart."

SCRIPTURAL STUDY

The UMC has wrestled with the issues of same-sex marriage and the ordination of otherwise qualified LGBTQ persons to Methodist ministry since its first General Conference in 1972, and much of the debate has centered on differing interpretations of scripture. Because the Bible is our chief source for Christian faith and life, the Discernment Team dedicated much of its time to the reading and study of scripture. The reference material, including the books listed above, gave voice to the differing viewpoints on scriptural interpretation and the reasoning/rationale behind these differing positions.

These resources also provided the team with information on the current science, research, challenges, and life experiences faced by the LGBTQ community related to church policies and practices. The research and subsequent discussions covered the entire spectrum from progressive to moderate to traditional views of scriptural interpretation. All of this information was extremely valuable to the Discernment Team's discussions and the overall discernment process.

For more information on relevant scriptural references from the Old and New Testament, please see the video of Discernment Sharing Session 2 (referenced below).

SEPTEMBER 2022 DISCERNMENT SHARING SESSIONS

The Discernment Team held four Wednesday night sessions in order to provide information on the issues to all members of Trinity. Videos of these sessions are available through Trinity's website and its YouTube channel, including an interview with our Bishop, Debra Wallace-Padgett. The subjects of the first four sessions were:

- **Session 1 — What does it mean to be United Methodist and how did we get here?**
 - Church history, current organization and governance
 - UMC outreach around the world
 - History of *Book of Discipline* statements on homosexuality
 - Concerns of traditionalists, centrists/moderates, and progressives

- **Session 2 — How can we be reading the same Bible and not read it the same?**
 - Concerns of traditionalists, centrists/moderates, and progressives
 - What does the Bible say? Review of Old and New Testament Scripture on issues
 - Review of arguments made on all sides of the issues
 - One last Scripture – “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By

this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35

- **Session 3 — How do we think theologically about matters on which we disagree?**
 - Scriptural guidance
 - John Wesley’s “The Distinguishing Marks of a Methodist”
 - Responses to congregation questions
 - Why are traditional churches leaving now?
 - The Trust Clause

- **Session 4 — What are the options for Trinity going forward?**
 - Upcoming Jurisdictional Conference and NAC Meeting
 - The basics of paragraph 2553
 - Possible scenarios for receiving the Discernment Team report
 - Pros and cons of possible outcomes

OCTOBER 2022 LISTENING SESSIONS FEEDBACK AND DATA

Both the sharing and listening sessions gave the Discernment Team the chance to hear directly from the church, and we collected over 800 responses during our two months of meetings. One overarching theme emerged from the comments, and that was a common belief that “Trinity should keep being Trinity.” Our members deeply love our church and are proud to be a part of a congregation focused on doing all we can to be Christ’s hands and feet in our community and world. Above all, Trinity members want to continue to focus on our shared ministry and mission. This belief appears to be at the core of our views as a congregation. Our disagreements are secondary to these goals.

Attendees at the listening sessions were given the opportunity to respond anonymously to several questions utilizing the Mentimeter survey software. Several members also submitted comments separately on note cards. As a part of the survey, participants were asked to classify themselves into one of the following categories:

Traditional Incompatibilists – These are church members whose understanding of the witness of Scripture regarding human sexuality is in line with the current wording of the *Book of Discipline* which forbids same-sex marriage and the ordination of people who are practicing homosexuals. Their concerns are of such importance to them that they would rather be in a denomination where all agree on these matters than be in a denomination where they would feel personally compromised by a diversity of views and practices relative to human sexuality.

Traditional Compatibilists – These are church members who hold traditional views on human sexuality, much like the first category, but they believe they can still be with others within the UMC connection who disagree with them. For example, a pastor might not want to be forced into performing a same-sex marriage, but can still be a part of a denomination where other pastors are allowed to perform such ceremonies. A traditional compatibilist holds tight to their own traditional understanding but also values the unity, mission, and impact of the UMC in many areas beyond the scope of human sexuality.

Progressive Compatibilists – Some of these church members may have started out as Traditional Compatibilists, but their understanding and views have changed over time. They would like to see the church ordain anyone who qualifies and allow same-sex marriage for committed Christian couples. They understand that many of their respected traditionalist friends do not agree with them. They, too, hold tight to their own progressive understanding and interpretation of Scripture, but also value the Christian bond and impact of the UMC and are willing to remain in a diverse denomination.

Progressive Incompatibilists – Church members in this category look at these issues through an understanding of Scripture which calls for justice and the care of the marginalized. They strive for full inclusion of all regardless of sexual orientation including same-sex marriages and ordination. This is of such high concern for them that they only want to be in a denomination that reflects these beliefs and priorities, believing that anything less is discriminatory and unjust.

Eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents fall into one of the two compatibilist categories relative to same-sex marriage and ordination. Respondents were also asked to choose whether Trinity should remain with the UMC or disaffiliate. They could also indicate that they did not have enough information to respond at this time. Eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents indicated they would prefer to remain in the UMC. Of the remaining 19%, 10% indicated a desire to join another denomination and 9% of respondents did not have adequate information at this time.

In response to the question, “What do you care about most relative to the decision before us as a congregation?” the most common responses were (1) be an accepting and loving church, (2) let Trinity remain the same church it is today, (3) remain a local church within the UMC, and (4) follow Biblical teachings.

We also discovered a significant amount of (understandable) confusion over the actual decision before us as a congregation. As a result, we feel it important to state again clearly that the *Book of Discipline*'s current position is that the practice of homosexuality

is “incompatible with Christian teaching,” and thus forbids churches or pastors from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions, and it likewise prohibits the ordination of ministers who are self-avowed homosexuals. At the same time, the current church law highlights the sacred worth of every human being as a child of God, and urges churches to be welcoming and open to all. This reflects a traditional position on human sexuality and can only be changed by action of the General Conference.

We also feel it important to point out that there have been instances throughout our history where church policy has been modified to reflect a fresh understanding of scripture and an increased knowledge and understanding of specific issues. The positions on slavery, female leadership, and remarriage of divorced persons are good examples. As noted above, the *Book of Discipline* is not being changed at this time, but we should maintain an open mind if such changes are adopted in the future.

Finally, Trinity’s Administrative Board recently adopted a Theological Statement setting forth our beliefs as a local church. That statement is attached to this report. What we have learned about our church through this discernment process is consistent with the beliefs captured in that document.

OBSERVATIONS

The full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church and the current prohibitions in the *Book of Discipline* have been the subjects of much controversy for many years in the UMC, and efforts to address this conflict have been complicated by the COVID pandemic and the postponement of the UMC’s General Conference from 2020, to 2022, and now to 2024. As a result, the next occasion for changes to be made to the *Book of Discipline* will be at the General Conference of 2024 and it is uncertain what changes, if any, might be made.

Trinity has been growing for many years, both in membership and in our service to Jesus Christ. This is evidenced by the 394 baptisms and 254 confessions of faith during the past five years. Many members have long held differing views on the issue of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons, while still working for a common cause and worshipping together. We believe this is possible because our congregation’s ultimate priority is to serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We should not let our differences diminish our respect for each other or our work toward the ultimate mission of our church.

Simply put, as a church attempting to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, we believe that we draw great strength from our theological diversity of views, that we can have unity without uniformity, and that following the teachings of Jesus supersedes

anything about which we might disagree. John Wesley could have been talking about Trinity in this sermon from 1750: "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?"

THE EVOLVING SITUATION AND TRINITY'S OPTIONS

We believe that the UMC and the NAC will continue to evolve and respond to issues of concern to our local churches, including Trinity. There are many aspects of the current discussion that are unclear or uncertain at this point, but it is clear that some churches are electing to leave the UMC to join the Global Methodist Church (a new Traditionalist denomination), another denomination, or become an independent church. We grieve the loss of these relationships and partnerships, but genuinely seek to bless them as they discern their future path.

Trinity's options at this point in time are:

1. Remain part of the UMC, or
2. Disaffiliate from the UMC and become a part of the Global Methodist Church, another denomination, or become an independent church.

The Discernment Team has considered the pros and cons of each of these alternatives. It is worth noting that any decision to disaffiliate from the UMC at this time would be based on speculation, as there is uncertainty associated with any of the alternatives as well as the potential outcome of future UMC General Conferences.

DISCERNMENT LEARNINGS

At the conclusion of its process, the Discernment Team members submitted the individual and collective insights that they developed during the time spent together. In no particular order, here are those observations:

- The Bible is the inspired word of God and the anchor of our Christian faith. Our conflict is not rooted in the importance of scripture. Interpretations of scripture may differ, but the teachings of Jesus related to loving and accepting others are consistent throughout the Gospels and should be the key to our personal walk with Christ.
- The Discernment Team wants Trinity to be able to continue to be Trinity, a church that loves its neighbors and daily expresses that love through service, outreach, youth ministry, children's ministry, worship, and fellowship. Our church, with its flaws and human errors, is sanctified for the work of Christ.
- There is no scientific consensus on why people are heterosexual, gay or lesbian, except that sexual orientation appears to stem from factors more determined

by nature than nurture. Sexual orientation is not a choice a person makes and there is good evidence that a person's sexual orientation cannot be changed through therapy, prayer, or outside intervention. Spending time with people who have a different sexual orientation or have family members with a different sexual orientation can teach all of us valuable lessons. Listening to someone else's pain creates empathy and genuine respect.

- In John 17, Christ prays for the unity of his followers, declaring it to be the most powerful witness to the truth of His resurrection. God loves every one of us completely, without limits, and he instructs us to love our neighbors the same way. We can find unity in that love that results in us working together in ways that are kind, productive, and expand God's kingdom. We believe Trinity members don't have to agree on everything, but that serving Christ and loving each other is our common call, and we are less without each other.
- Trinity's membership consists of people who have traditional, moderate, and progressive views of issues related to the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church. Regardless of our views, we all want our church to be a safe place where our differing views can be held and shared without fear of condemnation or retribution. This diversity of thought across a shared mission witnesses to the very unity to which Jesus calls us.

DISCERNMENT TEAM'S RECOMMENDATION

The Discernment Team unanimously recommends that Trinity remains a local church within the United Methodist Church. We believe that disaffiliation at this time narrows our mission field, weakens our connectional impact on the world, and does not reflect the diversity of our current church membership.

Respectfully submitted,

Meredith Buchanan
Dan Carter
Vickie Curtis
Amy DeWitte, *Spiritual Advisor*
Brian Erickson
Cindy Geer
Ruth Lee

Mark Limbaugh, *Chair*
Fred McCallum
Duane Shroyer
David Siegel
Nathan Smith
Susan Wiedeman

**THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT
ADOPTED BY THE TRINITY ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD
8/8/2022**

Here at Trinity...

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh, the Lord of heaven and earth, the Image of the invisible God, and within His life, death, and resurrection lie the power of salvation, the example for our lives, and the hope of eternity.

We believe God is Love, and that our highest calling is to love God with everything we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We believe that the Church is Christ's body on earth, and therefore it is our responsibility to be His hands and feet in our households, our communities, and the world.

We believe our mission is to make disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus, understanding that a disciple is a follower of Christ who has experienced God's grace to share God's grace.

We believe that the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is our primary and best resource for understanding the heart of God, that it contains everything necessary for salvation, and that the Church is therefore called to be grounded in scripture and led by grace.

We believe in the historic confessions of the Christian faith as contained in the doctrinal standards of the United Methodist Church, because we stand on the shoulders of the saints who have walked this way before us.

We believe in the holy sacraments of baptism and communion, ordinary vessels of God's extraordinary grace, and that these gifts of God are available to all.

We believe that an authentic faith is always a growing faith, that Christian maturity requires us to stay teachable, and that loving God requires our head, our hearts, and our hands.

We believe prayer is a vital part of our faith, a time to both seek God's blessing and discern God's will.

We believe that faith can only grow in community because we need the wisdom, accountability, and support that comes through relationships with other believers.

We believe that we can have unity without uniformity, and that our shared confession in Christ overcomes every difference between us.

We believe in making all people feel welcome, because God so loves the world, not just some of us.