

Dear Church Family,

It's a new year that is filled with new possibilities. In this season, God is working in the life of our church. We have the opportunity to take on a new challenge together: our future as a community called St. Luke Church.

Many of you are aware of the tension, conflict, and disharmony in the United Methodist Church. While the intent of leadership at St. Luke was to wait until the 2024 UMC General Conference took place to discern our future in the denomination, Kentucky Annual Conference leadership pressed us to do so sooner. This was the outcome of a meeting that I, along with 30 other pastors of large churches, had with Bishop Leonard Fairley during Holy Week in April of 2022. During the drive home from Crestwood, Kentucky, I realized it was time for our leadership to begin answering a single and important question: "What will St. Luke do about the challenges in the United Methodist Church?"

St. Luke's Lead Team and Staff are charged with making the major decisions of the church. We have been probing this question for nearly 18 months, the last nine months of which has been with great time and care to process this question. We have prayed together, debated vigorously, shed tears, and have realized the answer to the challenges of the United Methodist Church comes in the form of a single powerful statement:

The United Methodist Church has left us; therefore, the leadership of St. Luke has discerned it is time for us to disaffiliate.

Sadly, most of the public has heard that the current "church split" debate is over human sexuality. Our team believes this is not *the* core issue. Consider these core issues as to why our leadership is deeply troubled about the denomination...

- Our **core doctrinal beliefs** (for example, that Jesus is God, that Jesus is born of a virgin, that he truly rose from the dead, that forgiveness of sins and salvation comes from a relationship with Jesus) have been denied by some UMC Bishops, UMC pastors, UMC Seminaries, and key ministries within the United Methodist Church without accountability for their words or actions.
- The **leadership failures** in our denomination have grown increasingly worse, especially in the last twenty years. Bishops have failed to steer the United Methodist Church toward faithfulness to what we believe and fruitfulness in the vitality of our local churches. Bishops and the Judicial Council have failed to hold themselves and/or clergy accountable for breaking the rules of the UMC. Currently, we have clergy and bishops under appointment who possess an invalid ordination and/or consecration according to the rules of the UMC.
- Our **local church (St. Luke) has very little input or impact** on what happens regarding the direction of the denomination and its future. Throughout the United Methodist Church, clergy whose core beliefs do not pass the litmus test of orthodoxy are retained, ineffective clergy bring harm to local churches, and

appointment making is shifting away from what benefits the local church. Whereas they have failed to uphold their covenant, our property is owned by the UMC, and St. Luke is required to pay 10% of our offerings to the denomination.

- There is an **overarching sense of mission failure** as the UMC has been in decline for the last fifty years. Our structures such as the General Conference have failed in making fruitful change. While it is true that the doctrines and rules of the UMC have not changed on paper, the manner in which the church functions is now incongruent with our mission of disciple making. We have spent millions on commissions and failed initiatives. Of the 13 Methodist Seminaries that train many UMC clergy, only one possesses an orthodox statement of faith.
- Finally, the path for churches to leave the UMC **expires at the end of 2023**.

Given the above facts about how the United Methodist Church has left us, our Leadership Team and Administrative Teams have unanimously recommended disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church, and the Lexington District Superintendent has been informed that we will vote on the matter.

Methodism is at the heart of our doctrine, governance, and missional spirit. Our leadership believes that unfortunately the United Methodist denomination has left St. Luke, and is no longer a good fit for us. We intend on carrying forward the vision of being unashamedly passionate about pursuing Jesus Christ together, while offering hope, healing, and wholeness to Lexington in a way that fits our mission. The final decision in this matter is not made by the Senior Pastor, the staff, or church leadership. Rather, it is made by the membership of the church, and requires a 2/3 majority vote.

We realize that you are left with a lot of questions. Here are a few initial points for you to consider, and we will communicate more as time goes forward.

- The vote (members only) is scheduled for February 12, in the sanctuary.
- Please see the FAQ document on our website for initial helpful information.
- Sunday School Classes/Small Groups may desire materials for a group study. If your class/group would like tools for this, please contact Rev. Amy Carlson.
- If you have questions, please direct them to denomination@stlukelex.com.
- Please attend one of the Town Hall Meetings to be held February 5, and 8.
- Stay connected as we will release more information via email each week.
- You might also consider visiting <https://peopleneedjesus.net> for helpful articles.

Where do we intend to land – is there a new denomination or network we will join? YES.

We intend to narrow the choices down before our disaffiliation vote on February 12. If this vote passes, we will make a formal decision about affiliation by a church vote in early May.

Please join us in prayer as we seek God's vision for our future together at St. Luke.

I have full confidence in the countless hours, prayer, and care invested into this process, and believe that the Holy Spirit will guide us in these days.

Yours in Christ,

St. Luke Lead Team & Rev. Dr. Brian M. Ebel, Senior Pastor