

## **Holston Conference Limited Church Closure Process: Questions-And-Answers**

Following General Conference in March 2024, the Holston Conference Board of Trustees stated that it would honor its promise to seek a fair, gracious, and non-punitive process to allow churches that find it untenable to be associated with The United Methodist Church (UMC) to disaffiliate in a way that does not violate the UMC Book of Discipline. The Limited Church Closure (LCC) Process replaces the “disaffiliation process”. The Church Council is providing this summary which utilizes a question-and-answer format.

### **What is the Limited Church Closure (LCC) Process for 2024?**

The LCC process allows churches to sever their relationship with the UMC if the local church determines it can no longer function effectively in ministry with the denomination due to changes in the Book of Discipline related to human sexuality.

### **What is the background and reason for the LCC process?**

Once the former disaffiliation process expired on December 31, 2023, there was no provision in the Book of Discipline that permitted a church to sever its ties to the UMC while retaining full ownership of its church property. Consequently, the Holston Conference Board of Trustees used the church closure procedures in the Book of Discipline to provide a limited opportunity for churches who disagree with the human sexuality changes to leave the UMC with their church property, assuming certain conditions are met.

### **How does the church assess if this process is right for them?**

The church should prayerfully discern whether there is a consensus within the congregation to explore severing ties with the UMC because of the human sexuality changes. Because the process itself can be divisive, it is important to gauge whether there is sufficient interest within the congregation to meet the two-thirds majority vote required for leaving the UMC. Asbury will conduct a poll in September to determine whether such a consensus exists.

### **What are the steps to register for the LCC process?**

Local churches must file a Registry Form and related documentation with the District Superintendent by November 1, 2024.

### **What are the requirements to submit the Registry Form?**

- The senior pastor, church lay leader, church council chair, and trustees chair must sign the Registry Form, attesting that there is a consensus of the congregation to initiate a formal process to explore the possibility of ending its relationship with the UMC.
- The Registry Form must be accompanied with a copy of the church’s real property deed(s), a title opinion on the properties, and a \$100 non-refundable administrative fee.
- The pastor must also submit a Pastor Declaration Form stating whether the pastor intends to remain with the UMC. Rev. Bowers has expressed her intention to declare she will stay with the UMC.

### **What happens if the church decides to proceed with the LCC process?**

- The local church must submit the Registry Form, along with the other required documentation, to the District Superintendent by November 1, 2024.
- The District Superintendent will then appoint a Conference Guide Team, comprised of an equal number of clergy and laypersons, including at least two members from the local church.
- The Conference Guide Team will: (i) assess whether the church has a genuine conviction that the changes in the UMC Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality makes it untenable for the church to continue effective ministry with the UMC; (ii) provide an Assessment Study to the Holston Conference Board of Trustees that, among other things, evaluates the cost to the Conference of fulfilling the mission of the Church in the local community if the local church leaves the UMC; and (iii) draft an Evaluation Report that includes the approximate value of all local church property.
- The process will then pause until the UMC Judicial Council rules on its permissibility under the Book of Discipline. This ruling is expected in early November 2024.

- The Holston Conference Board of Trustees will then prepare a Limited Church Closure (LCC) Agreement, outlining the terms to convey title to all church property back to the church in the event the church votes to leave the denomination.
- Once the District Superintendent approves the LCC agreement, the church council will call a Church Conference to vote on accepting the agreement and severing the relationship with The United Methodist Church, which will require a 2/3rds majority of members present and voting. This vote must occur before January 31, 2025.
- If approved, the church will have until March 14, 2025, to submit all required closure documents and until March 31, 2025, to pay all closure costs. The closure will then be presented to the Holston Annual Conference for final approval.

*No church closure under this LCC process will be finalized unless the United Methodist Judicial Council rules that this Process is permissible under the United Methodist Book of Discipline. This ruling is expected the first week of November.*

**Does Asbury have to do anything to remain a part of the UMC?**

No. Asbury can decide to remain a part of the UMC just as it is today, and no further action is required.

**Can the church trustees create policies that restrict the use of the church’s building/facilities from hosting same-sex weddings?**

Yes. Asbury’s trustees are free to recommend building use policies that prohibit same-sex marriages or union ceremonies from being performed on local church property and the church council is free to accept and implement them.

**Can the church council request that a gay pastor not be sent to the church as part of the open itinerancy process?**

Yes. Asbury’s church council may request that a gay pastor not be sent to the church as part of the open itinerancy process and the church conference shall honor such requests.

**If the congregation chooses to pursue the LCC Process and it is approved by the Conference, what is the cost?**

Appendix B of the LCC Process lists the closure costs required to be paid to complete the transaction. Some, like two years conference Tithes, two years district apportionment and payment of salary and benefits to the Pastor for the remainder of the Conference year are easy enough to calculate. We estimate these costs to be approximately \$150,000. More difficult to quantify currently is the “assessment value of the church presence”. This will be determined utilizing the “evaluation report” prepared by the Conference Guide Team. This is done on a “case-by-case analysis”. Included in this report is the “approximate value of all local church property”. It is not clear from the materials provided how this cost will be determined. We believe it is prudent to assume it could be substantial.

Operating the church following closure of the Asbury UMC entity under this plan will likely involve other operating expenses which are not yet known. For example:

- ACEC will likely have to re-register/update its registration with the state to continue operating. We anticipate this will involve costs for registration and transfer activities which are currently unknown.
- Under the LLC plan, if approved, Asbury UMC would formally close as a business entity and relaunch as a new entity. Asbury would incur costs associated with establishing the new legal entity. These costs are currently unknown.

**When will the congregation be able to complete a straw-poll to indicate its opinion on Asbury’s future direction under the limited church closure process?**

The straw-poll will open on September 8 and will close on September 22. You may submit your poll-vote between that time using an online survey form or by paper/hardcopy form. Instructions on how to access the online poll and a copy of the paper poll form will be sent out via US Mail and provided via email shortly. These materials will also be available on our [www.asburylife.org](http://www.asburylife.org) website. You may complete the survey online or return your paper poll to the church office in person or by US Mail by the closure date.