

## Why I'm Moving to the GMC - To Remain Faithful

by Dr. Burt Palmer, Sr. Pastor, Kingwood United Methodist Church

As I begin, I am aware that you have four other pastoral perspective papers that share hopes for the future of our church. It is refreshing to see the distinctive way each one approaches the topic; yet there are common themes that are evident: *a love for and desire to continue serving Kingwood UMC as it is; a commitment to our current historically traditional theology; a love for Jesus and His power to transform lives; and, an understanding that the aligning with the GMC is the most compatible and best option for each of us and this church.* Here is the story of my journey, which is distinctive and embraces these same themes.

I was baptized Methodist by my grandfather three years before the United Methodist Church was formed. My dad led me through confirmation. I'm a 3rd generation Methodist pastor. I was formed and shaped by the UMC, and since 1985 have given my life to her in service, 33 of those as an Ordained Pastor. Shawn and I have served city and rural churches and even started a church. I attended a UM college and Seminary. You could say that the UMC and Bishops have shaped my entire life since nearly every place I have lived and called home has been determined by a UMC bishop. So, leaving what has defined and structured my life is difficult, but I leave with a sense of peace and confidence.

When we were first contacted by the Bishop about coming to Kingwood UMC, God placed the words of Isaiah 30:21 before me in my scripture reading, "*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*" Shawn and I prayed that verse over and over as we asked God to help guide our decision to offer ourselves in ministry here. We were thriving where we were and were not seeking to leave. Ultimately, we felt the Holy Spirit's confirmation that we should listen and trust God in the process. That process led us to Kingwood. We are blessed to be here, and I am honored to be your Sr. Pastor, or as I like to say, "Sheepdog," since Jesus is the Shepherd. Shawn and I are moving to the GMC. If KUMC stays UMC, my time at KUMC will end soon. Given what we have been through together these past five years, the idea of not being your pastor is agonizing.

All my ministry has been about working alongside people in the face of external challenges, from disaster relief and tragedies to grieving with families during loss. But nothing prepared me for the emotional and spiritual struggle I have felt growing in the UMC since I sat on the floor of General Conference 2016. It was then that I realized the church I loved so deeply was no longer the one I knew. I find myself wondering what my grandad and dad would say about all of this. Bishops and Boards of ministry disregarding the Book of Discipline, our Covenant – and an entire Jurisdiction of Bishops ignoring the Judicial Council. My grandad and dad worked to be a part of building something, something I had given my life to as well. But that church no longer exists, so I am moving to the GMC.

I have served at almost every level in the UMC – local church, district, conference, jurisdictional, and general conference delegate. I have served a total of 14 years on Boards of Ordained Ministry, served on the Episcopacy Committee in two different conferences, and have been a part of interviewing candidates for Bishop. This service has been in three different conferences and eight different districts. Though I was not a delegate, I was at the General Conference of 2019. I shared some of that experience with you after returning from St. Louis in 2019. Differences became solidified divisions in St. Louis. The best hope that emerged was a gracious and amicable separation, but that hope has been shattered, and those plans have been abandoned by leadership in the UMC.

Nothing has been as difficult in ministry for me as these past four months in this affiliation discernment process. Leadership in the UMC, bishops, and delegates that could not bring resolution to the division within the denomination, means that we must address that division as a church. This is a terrible burden to place on the local church, and I believe that it reflects the ineffectiveness of our bishops and the dysfunction of the denominational system. A religious denomination is "a subgroup within a religion that operates under a common name, tradition, and identity ." We are what we do, not what we say; in other words, our actions define who we are, not our rhetoric. And if that is true, then the UMC is no longer one denomination. I understand that accepting this reality is painful; I personally feel that pain on many levels.

Now, as we find ourselves at another crossroads moment, I look to the prophet Jeremiah, who states, "*This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths: 'Where is the good Then walk in it and you will find rest for your souls."*" (Jer. 6:16). At this crossroads moment, we need to choose where to look and where to walk. Shawn and I have prayed, listened, and made our choice. We choose the ancient path of the historic faith contained in the Holy Scriptures and the rich Wesleyan heritage of Methodists. That path leads us to the Global Methodist Church.

It is a decision that is not made lightly. I have already witnessed how this choice affects my relationships with other clergy, members of the church, and relationships within our church. It's not the first time I have had to make a decision at a crossroads that everyone in the church did not affirm, but this is certainly the most significant decision I have made in my ministry leadership. It isn't just a personal decision; it is a pastoral decision. We all knew that denominational turmoil would follow General Conference 2016 and the called session of 2019. I was appointed in 2018, and the pastoral profile for KUMC asked the Bishop for a conservative, traditional, covenant-keeping Wesleyan. That is who I am; it is a calling from which I cannot and will not waiver.

The UMC shaped me spiritually, grounded me biblically, and trained me theologically. I was taught to love the Scripture through Disciple Bible Study, so I can't disregard the Scriptures. My time at Duke and Perkins installed the intellectual rigor of the historical faith and biblical scholarship that led me to this decision. The Walk to Emmaus, Chrysalis, and Kairos were where I saw the Holy Spirit change and awaken the lives of youth and adults to a vibrant faith in Jesus. All of this is what I see being lived out most faithfully and fruitfully in the GMC. Like our church, the GMC looks to the ancient path of the Wesleyan tradition and Holy Scripture and walks in it.

I've listened. I've looked. I've chosen to follow Christ in the path of the GMC.

It's the best way that I know to preach the Gospel to all the world . . . and when necessary, use words.