

## Weston United Methodist Church Discernment Session 5

5/3/2020 Starting announcements:

The Weston UMC is taking a proactive approach to our future in the United Methodist Church as we continue our process of Discernment begun in early January. Our fifth session was on Sunday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, conducted on Zoom beginning at 12:30 and ending at 2:00. Information from the first four sessions is available on our website, [westonunitedmethodist.org](http://westonunitedmethodist.org), under the "**Discernment**" tab.

**Topic for Session 5:** Rev. Gary Shaw, Lead Pastor of the Carter Memorial United Methodist Church in Needham, will join us as we discuss the implications of being a part of the United Methodist Church in light of the challenges and transformation that our church and the greater Christian church is dealing with in the current international COVID-19 crisis.

We are not alone in this process. As a Reconciling Church, Weston UMC is among many churches across the United Methodist Connection which are deeply affected by this situation. A group of 9 other churches, calling themselves "the New England Discerners," have been exploring possibilities for their future since September. Along with them, we are following the requirements of New England Resolution 211, approved in June 2019, that there be at least an 8-month discernment process before any individual congregation can vote whether or not to leave the UMC. Concurrently, the entire New England Conference is exploring the options and possibilities of our relationship with the General Conference of the UMC, one of which is becoming a separate entity as a more open and reconciling body. With the COVID-19 crisis moving General Conference to 2021 and probably postponing New England's Annual Conference as well, we do not know what the future will bring or when we will be able to act on any of this.

Remember, being involved in this process is NOT a decision whether or not to leave the United Methodist Church. This is simply an educational and discernment process in order to help us discover the best path forward for our church. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask a member of the Church Council or Pastor Pat.

Discernment Session 5 and Session 6 were to have been on the topic of General Conference, but since General Conference has been postponed until 2021, we are looking at different topics, and at what it means to be in this time when General Conference will not be happening but COVID-19 pandemic is happening.

The reality is that General Conference's postponement doesn't put the injustice on hold, doesn't stop the pain from happening, and doesn't change the community's concept/image of the UMC in the context of the Traditional Plan's

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restrictions. In another church's listening session, some non-member community members who were invited to speak said that they didn't see the importance of the denomination, and that their relationship with the individual church was what was significant. And some of them said: As long as you stay affiliated with the UMC, it inhibits our ability to partner with you. Our denominational identity can do damage to our reputation as an open, reconciling, justice-oriented church.

Last month we talked about intersectionality – the various ways that we divide groups of people and the harm that is caused by that. Immediate steps should be on addressing the harm, and asking ourselves how do we engage with people who have been historically marginalized, and systematically oppressed...

In terms of the discernment process itself, we are following a procedure set down by the denomination, and following the rules set down by our annual conference. We are awaiting some clear information from various Annual Conference bodies that they were required to give us by those same rules, and in our next session we will look at the information that they have given us to date.

Several of the churches going through this process are close to the point of holding a vote to determine if they are ready to disaffiliate. In our conversation last week, it was indicated that, if NEAC leaves as a block, with the intention of creating a healthy, inclusive, and justice-oriented church, that would be most attractive to many of the people going through this process.

So, let me share some information with you that I have gleaned out of the impossibly huge amount of information, opinions, perspectives that I have received over these past few weeks regarding what it means to be the church now and what this crisis means for the church of the future. Then I will pose several questions and I hope that you will be honest and open and share your thoughts about them with one another.