

To my church family,

As the leader of the largest ministry of Atascocita United Methodist Church, I want to share some thoughts, joys and concerns from my heart about the Discernment process and beyond.

I have the opportunity and blessing to see firsthand God's love at work within our church walls every weekday. I see the Spirit of Christ moving through the Weekday Learning Center Staff, through parents and through all His kingdom of little children. The precious little hearts of children accept, trust, believe, and give love unconditionally. It is a gift that fills my heart every day and is affirmed when I look out at the light of Christ filling their souls when I lead Chapel every day. There is not much that can compare to the joy of Jesus lighting the heart of a child!

Our family began attending AUMC over 33 years ago and I began working in the ministry of the Weekday Learning Center 26 years ago. There have been several times in the life of this church when we have experienced brokenness, hurting, and some parting of our congregation. I've worked under, I believe, 7 different Senior pastors and at least 7 if not more Associate pastors. Each had a special gift and talent that our church was needing during their tenure here- God always knew and still knows!

This church has watched God call Leigh-Anne Williams and equip her to grow, blossom, shine, and be ordained. She is compassionate, strong, and full of God's grace for all. She has been a wonderful complement to our Senior Pastors. Mike Tyson was sent to us to us, I firmly believe, at just the right time. God never leads us where He doesn't prepare and equip us. Mike has been one of the very best pastors I have had the privilege and honor of working for and alongside. His management of the business side of the church and school has been a strong gift to me. His strength and spiritual guidance have blessed my life tremendously. Mike's experience as a banker, pastor, and Vibrant Church Initiative leader, has given this church amazing tools and knowledge to rise back up from the pandemic closure and flooded Life Center building. More importantly though, I greatly appreciate both Mike and Leigh-Anne's convictions to uphold the vows they took at their ordination. I truly feel that God brought this leadership team together for the season we are in now. Mike and Leigh-Anne are a strong team that I trust completely, and we need strong leaders who can take us through the wilderness and on to the future, following Christ's lead.

When previous pastors would talk in our church staff meetings about what was going on in the denomination and what was talked about at General Conferences concerning the issues surrounding the divisiveness of the United Methodist Church, I didn't want to know about it, didn't want to hear about it, and I certainly didn't want to think about it. I knew there was an impending storm brewing, but if I didn't really know what was going on, then it wasn't going to happen. I was burying my head in the sand to make it all go away and not have to deal with what was coming.

Growing up, I was baptized Baptist, confirmed Lutheran, and then I married a Church of Christ. God has blessed me tremendously with opportunities to worship Him and learn about Him through several different denominations. Because of my diverse denominational background, I am not tied to a brand of a cross but tied instead to the cross of Christ. My husband and I chose to join the Methodist church because we felt an acceptance of our past church affiliations and a connection to welcoming body of

Christ for our family. Both our children were baptized, confirmed, and married here in this Methodist body of Christ.

The decision to disaffiliate and join the Global Methodist Church, for me, is not about the church ignoring doctrine and allowing practicing gay clergy to serve or performing same sex marriage. I feel so many are portraying this as the only reason for this split and implying that we are excluding everyone in the LBGTQ community. I have never knowingly excluded anyone, and it saddens my heart to the core that someone may think I or anyone who I work side by side in ministry with here, would treat any child or adult in a hurtful or harmful way. I have close relationships and good friends with people who are part of the LBGTQ community, along with friends of my grown children. I love and care for all and welcome EVERYONE to God's family of faith.

It is unfortunate that people on the outside looking in, are only seeing one side. As the adage goes, there's more than one side to a story and the truth is somewhere in the middle. For me, as a business and ministry leader, I must examine all the individual pieces, but it is the big picture of the completed puzzle that is important to me. The little pieces get in the way and sometimes get lost, but when the puzzle is put together with the Spirit of Christ, all the connecting pieces fall into place just the way God has planned it to be. THAT completed picture is perfect and beautiful.

As the Director of the Weekday Learning Center, there are policies, procedures, and rules in place to protect me, the school, the families, the children, and this church that houses it all. As a state licensed facility, there are many minimum standards the school must comply with or face repercussions. The school could be shut down at any given time for ignoring standards that are in place. There are fire codes, health codes, and hundreds of administrative, classroom and building standards we must abide by. I agree to uphold those standards as the Director of the school. It is my job to know them all and make sure they are followed, or I could lose my credentials along with the school being punished or closed.

Our Bishops and Clergy in the United Methodist Church make vows and agree to uphold the Book of Discipline of the Church, just the same way I must uphold the Minimum Standards of the State of Texas for Child Care Centers concerning the Weekday Learning Center. It is a deep concern of mine that in the current state of the United Methodist Church, there is no follow through or repercussions when doctrine is blatantly ignored. In my opinion the splintering and brokenness of the United Methodist Church is a direct result of not following the doctrine set forth for the denomination. It is not because of the disagreement of one part, but of the failure of the whole. For me it is about the Deity of God, it is about Spiritual formation, it is about the use of finances, it is about our clergy, it's about not owning the property we work so hard to pay for, and so much more! It is for me about the brokenness and splintering of the whole denomination that has brought us to this place we are now walking through of discernment and disaffiliation. I personally do not see repair or unity; I see continued unravelling and division.

It seems to me that people who aren't knowledgeable about the United Methodist Church, don't understand that our current Book of Discipline hasn't changed at all, and that the Global Methodist Church will keep most of the current Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. **We must change to stay the same.** And changing to stay the same comes with so many good things from not just the Global Methodist Church, but for THIS body of Christ right here in Atascocita.

While teaching the stories at VBS back in June, I caught myself over and over, talking with the children about challenges and struggles of God's people, saying "doing the right thing for God is sometimes very hard to do". Every time it came out of my mouth, I did a little internal nod to God saying "I hear you! I know! You are talking to ME TOO!"

We have a hard decision in front of us, but also a wonderful opportunity to continue to show this community that God's presence is alive and well and that though we splinter and divide, the strength of His love and grace can overcome all. It is an opportunity to continue pushing forward through the hard and moving with the confidence of children that God has us in His mighty hands and He WILL without a doubt reward and bless us for the work we do to further HIS Kingdom.

Are there obstacles? Absolutely! Is anything ever perfect? Only God is perfect! Will there be changes, redirection, conflict, compromise? Always, every day! But PEACE comes from following the Master, wherever He leads you- here or somewhere else. Grace will cover us all, Christ's forgiveness is constant, and His Love binds and connects our lives, blessing our hearts with joy from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I LOVE this church body and I LOVE this place, for it is my second home. I practically live here and have for years, serving as the WLC Director and former Children's Ministry Director. I am so very thankful to all those who sacrificed so much to start this church, and through the years of its history, I'm equally thankful to those who have continued that spirit of faithfulness and blessed us with more sacrifices and gifts. My deepest gratitude goes to ALL who have played a part in the life of this church over the years. We have done so much to spread the Word of God to this community and beyond, and our work is not over yet. GOD IS MOVING HERE!

While growing weary from this difficult process, I'm excited about the journey before us with new ways to grow, and new ways to bless and to be blessed. I am also forever grateful for God's gift of Mike Tyson and Leigh-Anne Williams to our body of Christ. I pray God will continue to work in their hearts as they lead us through this time and into the future. I pray also for God's hand to continue to guide the Administrative Board members, giving them the knowledge and strength to make difficult decisions, always being led by God. And I lift in prayer every member of this church, whether struggling or not, along with those on our outer edges. I pray each person will turn off the noise of the outside, be still and listen to what God needs you to hear in your heart, mind, and soul. I pray that God's knowledge and wisdom will reign, that forgiveness will abound, that love for all will shine into the world, and that hearts will join together on all sides through the Peace of Christ that passes all understanding. God has a plan for each of our lives and for THIS body of Christ, so let's let HIM direct our steps and guide us all to the outcome that grows His Kingdom here on Earth. Let's go light the world with the heart of the children of God!

Blessings, Peace, and Love,

Beth

Beth Johnson

AUMC Weekday Learning Center Director