

# Is a United Methodist church near you cutting ties with its denomination?

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Two United Methodist churches in Oklahoma may be on opposite ends of the doctrinal spectrum when it comes to same-gender marriage and openly gay clergy.

However, there is one thing they both have in common.

Both Asbury United Methodist Church in Tulsa and Mosaic United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City plan to sever ties with their denomination. Their plans to disaffiliate are emblematic of an expected worldwide schism over gay inclusion in the global United Methodist Church.

"This is a denominational issue that's being played out in every annual conference of the United Methodist Church, including the international central conferences which would include Africa, Europe and the Philippines," said the Rev. Joe Harris, a spokesman for the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference.

The congregation at Asbury, one of the largest United Methodist churches in the state, voted on March 6 to disaffiliate from the denomination. Mosaic United Methodist in Oklahoma City voted that same day to begin the formal process to cut denominational ties.

The two churches have different viewpoints, particularly when it comes to the hot button issue of gay inclusion that has threatened to split the United Methodist Church for years. Asbury affirms the current United Methodist ban

on openly gay clergy and gay marriage, while Mosaic has consistently pushed for full inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the life of the Church.

However, leaders of both churches said their congregations are seeking to disconnect from their global denomination because they are simply tired of the divisiveness within the faith group.

In a video released on March 7, the Rev. Tom Harrison, Asbury's senior minister, likened the atmosphere at denominational gatherings to that of an "ugly family feud," with delegates leaving "angry, sad and unhappy."

The Rev. Scott Spencer, pastor of Mosaic, shared similar views during a recent interview.

"Churches with more traditional views and churches with more progressive views seem to be in constant gridlock," he said. "We just want to start a new era of our church."

## **Domino effect**

Matters appear to have come to a head with the March 3 announcement that a global denominational meeting initially planned for 2020 would be postponed for a third time — to 2024.

The announcement is sure to have widespread implications for Oklahoma's United Methodists, who make up the second largest faith group in the state in terms of the number of churches. According to the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church, there are 462 active churches, representing 204,821 members.

The global denomination's General Conference meeting was initially postponed from 2020 to 2021 because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The gathering was postponed from 2021 to 2022, in part, because some delegates in various parts of the world lacked access to COVID vaccines. According to the United Methodist Commission on General Conference, the most recent

postponement is due to a variety of factors related to the pandemic, including a two-year wait for some delegates to obtain visas and passports to travel to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the denominational gathering was set to take place in August.

The commission said other issues that factored into the decision included the health and safety of delegates, volunteers and other attendees, vaccination rates and the need for provisions for quarantine or medical care should any of the delegates contract COVID while at the meeting.

The thrice-delayed meeting has had a domino effect on several levels.

Spencer said he thinks the postponement caused churches on the brink of disaffiliation, like his own, to officially begin the process of severing denominational connections.

"I think the more you lean to the right or left, you're more willing to leave," he said. "I think if you're more in the middle, you're more willing to wait it out."

A particularly significant result of the delay is how it will impact churches who want to proceed with disaffiliation immediately.

The elected delegates at the General Conference make up the denomination's top lawmaking assembly. Some United Methodists had hoped the denomination's delegates once again would hash out the issue of the prohibition on gay clergy and gay marriage, with perhaps a different outcome than what happened at the 2019 General Conference. At that gathering in St. Louis, not only did delegates reaffirm the denomination's so-called gay ban — they strengthened penalties for those who violated it.

Some United Methodists also hoped the assembly would approve a proposal that outlined what they described as a "graceful exit" process for clergy and churches. However, that proposal, called the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, cannot go into effect until it is approved and adopted by the General Conference delegates.

With the delegates' gathering postponed until 2024, regional Methodist conferences like the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference must oversee and administer the disaffiliation process as outlined in the denomination's Book of Discipline, the Rev. Jimmy Nunn said.

As bishop of the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference and Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, Nunn said there were several avenues for disaffiliation open to clergy and churches, although he preferred one, outlined in "paragraph 2553" that was added to the denomination's Book of Discipline at the 2019 special General Conference gathering.

The denomination's Council of Bishops recently affirmed by an overwhelming majority that paragraph 2553 would be the primary paragraph used for disaffiliation and separation.

The Oklahoma Methodist conference will host its annual meeting as scheduled in May. Nunn said the conference will have a special meeting in October to deal with disaffiliation.

The bishop said no church would be considered officially disaffiliated from the denomination until it had fulfilled all requirements of the process, including paying any money owed to Oklahoma Methodist Conference for such things like clergy pensions.

Nunn said the Oklahoma Conference's Office of Transitional Ministry, created in 2021, had been working on the steps toward disaffiliation. The office, headed by the Rev. Patricia "Tish" Malloy, will be helping churches walk through the process.

## **Tale of two churches**

In announcing the church's plans to disaffiliate, Asbury leaders said the church, with more than 7,000 members, is one of the largest United Methodist churches in the United States. And the Oklahoma United Methodist

Conference leadership said Asbury is the fourth largest United Methodist church in the state, with St. Luke's United Methodist deemed the largest, followed by Boston Avenue United Methodist in Tulsa as second, and United Methodist Church of the Servant as third.

Harrison, Asbury's senior pastor, said his church's leadership has been trying to determine their next move for several years. He said the denomination's general conference gatherings should be a "wonderful celebration of how we're making disciples for Jesus all over the world," but they've been divisive instead.

"We feel the United Methodist Church is heading in the wrong direction," Harrison said in a March 7 video.

Asbury's leaders said their church will simply be known as Asbury Church after ties with the denomination are formally severed. They said the issue of gay inclusion is part of the reason for their planned exit, but not the only reason.

"Some think that what the Church has believed for 2,000 years about scripture and tradition needs to be abandoned because our culture has changed," Harrison said. "Some of this is about sexuality but the deeper issue is about theology, including the Trinity and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus."

Harrison said like families, friends and organizations dealing with people, the Church has always had "painful moments" and he felt a "significant loss" in the coming disconnection from the denomination.

The church has yet to decide which denomination it will join. In the meantime, Asbury leaders said the church has retained attorney Dan Dalton of Detroit-based Dalton + Tomich, along with local counsel, to represent the church's legal interests. In a news release, the church said it plans to retain its building and property and assume current and future debts, expenses and maintenance costs.

Meanwhile, Spencer's Mosaic congregation is smaller than Asbury's, and has about 200 members. Mosaic is affiliated with the Reconciling Ministries Network, a coalition of United Methodist churches working within the global denomination to gain full inclusion for LGBTQ individuals in the life of the church.

Like their larger counterpart, the church members came to the recent conclusion that it was time to move on. Spencer said after disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church, Mosaic likely will seek to become affiliated with a more liberal denomination, the United Church of Christ. That denomination, he said, welcomes openly gay clergy and same-gender marriage is celebrated, not prohibited.

"The bottom line is because of how we understand the polity of our denomination, we just believe that change is coming very slowly," Spencer said. "We don't think change is going to come quickly for LGBTQ."

He said members of his Oklahoma City house of worship took a straw poll on March 6 to begin the process to formally cut ties with the United Methodist Church.

Mosaic church members did not agree with the strict penalties that awaited individuals and churches who violated the gay ban. They've been chafing under those restrictions ever since they were adopted in 2019.

Mosaic members held a "Service of Resistance" in January 2020 where they and several partnering churches said as much.

"The language of the General Conference in St. Louis was the most restrictive yet," Spencer said. "We want to enter into a new era without that hanging over us. We don't want to leave angry at people. We just want to start a new era."

**Wait and see**

Recent news of the General Conference postponement has changed life for other United Methodists, as well.

The Rev. D.A. Bennett, senior pastor of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church in south Oklahoma City, is president of the Oklahoma chapter of the Wesleyan Covenant Association. The association of traditionalist or "orthodox" United Methodist clergy and churches had announced plans that it would eventually form a traditionalist Methodist denomination called the Global Methodist Church. The date for the official formation was moved to May 1 after the General Conference gathering was postponed for a third time.

In April 2021, Asbury and St. Andrew's hosted an Oklahoma chapter conference for the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

Recently, Bennett said although he is a part of the Wesleyan association, his church is not an affiliate of the organization. He said he was drawn to the association because it is proactive rather than reactive.

As soon as news began spreading about the delayed General Conference meeting, people began contacting him with questions about what's next, he said.

"Our strategy in Oklahoma has been to prepare for the General Conference scheduled for August of this year," he said. "Now that it is postponed until 2024, the last seven days, it have been like drinking from Niagara Falls."

Bennett said people want to know more about disaffiliation and the coming launch of the Global Methodist Church. Many clergy, both retired and active, have been asking him about ordination or benefits of the Global Methodist Church.

"I have visited with pastors literally from California to Florida wondering what our course of action will be in Oklahoma," Bennett said. "There is much anxiety from people I visit with, and my hope is that we move forward in graceful fashion. Though stressful, this is an exciting time."

As for his own church, the minister said there are no plans to cut ties with the United Methodist denomination right now.

"There has not been time for our leadership or our congregation to consider the possibility of joining a new denomination, but given the latest developments, all United Methodists will have to consider the options that are best for their community of faith," Bennett said.

"Every church will have to consider how, when and what denomination of which it will belong."

Meanwhile, the Rev. Trina Bose North is senior pastor of Crown Heights United Methodist Church, another Methodist house of worship that belongs to the pro-LGBTQ Reconciling Ministries Network.

North and her congregation have no plans to disaffiliate. She said she and her church members are hopeful that a path may be forged for full gay inclusion sooner rather than later now that the delegates' gathering has been postponed and the Global Methodist Church for traditionalist clergy and churches will become an official denomination in May.

"I've been waiting to see which direction United Methodists are going," North said.

"We feel the denomination is moving towards inclusion, therefore my church, which is a progressive church, will have a home."

She said in the ongoing Church conflict over gay inclusion, culture is everything.

In some parts of the world, like parts of Africa, it's illegal to be openly LGBTQ, and many United Methodists in those areas are resistant to lifting the gay clergy/same-gender prohibition, partly due to their leanings toward conservative theology, but also because of colonial-era laws criminalizing homosexual sex acts.



By contrast, gay rights in American culture have surpassed those in the U.S. United Methodist Church, with same-gender couples able to legally wed and some Christian denominations welcoming openly gay clergy. United Methodists like North have vowed to keep working for the full inclusion that has eluded gay members of their denomination.

"It's clearly culturally contextual," North said of the ongoing struggle.