

## **Unhappy with LGBTQ-friendly revisions, Trinity Methodist church sues to disaffiliate**

Concerned that it's overarching conference may allow LGBTQ priests and same-sex marriages, Trinity on the Hill United Methodist Church in Augusta this week filed a lawsuit against the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church to quicken the pace of its disaffiliation.

The complaint, filed in Columbia County Superior Court on Wednesday, alleges the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church "threatened[ed] to destroy the religious congregation" by delaying its disaffiliation process and putting the church at risk of losing its property.

Other defendants listed in the lawsuit are Greg Porterfield, Columbia County resident and district superintendent for the Southeastern District of the UMC; Sue Hauptert-Johnson, a Virginia resident and former bishop; and Robin Dease, who lives in Atlanta and serves as the current bishop.

### **How we got here**

The church, which has been worshipping at facilities on Monte Sano Avenue in Richmond County since 1927, states it is controlled by the Book of Discipline, which outlines beliefs, standards and doctrines of the church, according to the lawsuit.

At the last General Conference UMC meeting in 2019, the conference adopted a new provision for the Book of Discipline "to deal with increasing disagreements" related to whether members of the LGBTQ community should be ordained as ministers and whether UMC ministers should perform same-sex marriages.

Trinity stated it "does not favor such ordinations or marriages, which Trinity fears will be imposed by the next General Conference of the UMC," according to the lawsuit.

There have yet to be any official changes to the UMC's doctrine. However, the church stated it would like to pre-emptively disaffiliate from the UMC and retain its property, according to the suit.

This is allowed under rules created by the conference, if done by Dec. 31, 2023. But the lawsuit states UMC conspired to deprive Trinity of its right to withdraw from the conference with its property intact by delaying the process and then putting an indefinite "pause" in the disaffiliation process in December 2022.

The "pause" means no applications for a church conference, which is required for disaffiliation, will be acted on. Also, it means no disaffiliation requests will be presented before the General Conference in April and May 2024, another requirement.

The church alleges in the lawsuit that these hurdles would set them past the deadline for disaffiliation.

Trinity noted in the suit that UMC leadership has refused to meet with them to discuss the "pause" and timing issues.

The church on Thursday declined to comment on the suit and deferred questions to its attorney, Charles C. Stebbins III, who also declined to comment.

"Pride has grown through the past 13 years in the City of Augusta," said Augusta Pride President Michael Barnard Jenkins of the lawsuit. "It is disheartening to see that locally there's obviously some tensions. ... There are going to be times where people disagree, but we have to push forward."

### **Other Georgia churches who have disaffiliated**

In June 2022, during the UMC's annual conference in Athens, Georgia, dozens of churches chose to disaffiliate themselves from the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Quest Church in Grovetown was among the 70 churches who chose to part ways with the conference.

In a statement from the USA Today Network at the time, executive pastor Sarah MacDonald said "the intensifying division in our denomination has become a significant distraction from Quest Church's primary mission and purpose in our community and world, thus the reason for our disaffiliation."

While Quest did not appear to have any trouble with the process, Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church in Cobb County also chose to pursue legal action against UMC.

Recently, Cobb County Superior Court ruled Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church, the largest church in the North Georgia Conference of the UMC, was allowed to disaffiliate and keep its property.