

## NEWS

# High stakes prompt United Methodist bishop to call for Oklahoma churches to pause in leaving denomination



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Two prominent downtown Oklahoma City churches whose histories have converged and diverged over the years now find themselves on a similar path once again as they both seek to leave the United Methodist denomination.

Withdrawal plans of both First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City and St. Luke's United Methodist have drawn the attention of the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference and its bishop.

In recent weeks, Oklahoma Methodist Bishop Jimmy Nunn asked St. Luke's to reschedule its Jan. 23 meeting to discuss withdrawal, or disaffiliation, so that he could address the congregation. That gathering, the first of several meetings required to leave, was rescheduled to Monday, Feb. 13, at the church, 222 NW 15. Meanwhile, Nunn and regional conference leaders postponed First United Methodist-Oklahoma City's planned Jan. 22 disaffiliation vote and a new date hasn't been set for the congregation meeting at 131 NW 4.

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Disagreement about the scriptural compatibility of same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay clergy is at the heart of an ever-widening divide across the worldwide United Methodist Church. In 2022, 29 Oklahoma churches disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church, which is America's second largest Protestant denomination, behind the Southern Baptist Convention, and Oklahoma's second largest faith group, with 408 affiliated churches in the state, behind Oklahoma Southern Baptists, with 1,615 affiliated churches.

In a recent interview, Nunn said he wanted to talk to St. Luke's congregation because he likes the church, which is the largest United Methodist church in the state.

"We've got a lot of a lot of things that we actually stand in common for," he said of St. Luke's. "I think we share the same vision or a similar vision for transformation in the world and we agree that the most important thing is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We agree that the whole matter of human sexuality is going to be addressed at General Conference in 2024. ... So, I would just ask for patience to see — see what develops."

The worldwide United Methodist Church is expected to hold its long-delayed General Conference assembly in 2024. As the denomination's top lawmaking body, General Conference delegates may once again take up the matter of the faith group's ban on same-sex marriage and openly gay ordination.

Nunn said he will be recommending that each church contemplating disaffiliation consider waiting until the denomination's delegates decide whether to affirm or strike down the gay inclusion ban. Nunn said he thinks a monumental decision like withdrawal from the denomination shouldn't be made based on an uncertain outcome. At this point, no one really knows what will happen at that 2024 meeting, he said.

"We've just gotten into a situation where people, I guess, have grown impatient or are projecting what might happen and trying to spin a narrative a certain way, one way or the other, that this is a foregone conclusion," Nunn said.

"Nothing's a foregone conclusion."

Nunn said the conference is asking First United Methodist-OKC, often called First Church, to consider how it has been fulfilling its mission as a United Methodist congregation. A person knowledgeable of the situation and who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the discussions, said the congregation has essentially been asked to postpone its disaffiliation vote until after it conducts a study to determine the church's effectiveness in the community. *The Oklahoman* has learned that First Church members took an unofficial vote on disaffiliation on Feb. 5 and 75 percent voted in favor of cutting denominational ties.

The bishop said he isn't singling out St. Luke's or First Church because he has been talking to other congregations across the state and plans to visit with more of those churches considering disaffiliation this year. The bishop said both of the downtown Oklahoma City churches just happen to be on the "disaffiliation timeline."

## Year-end deadline is key

Across the U.S., many United Methodist churches like St. Luke's and First Church don't view the situation in the same way as Nunn. Many of those churches attempting to disaffiliate likely feel some urgency in the matter because there is a certain motivation to exit the denomination before the end of 2023.

That's because during the special 2019 General Conference gathering, delegates approved an addition to the denomination's policy book, the Book of Discipline, which allows for churches to disaffiliate from the denomination based on their disagreement with the United Methodist Church's stance on human sexuality. The provision of this paragraph will remain in effect until Dec. 31.

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There's concern among congregations considering disaffiliation that waiting until after this deadline may mean more difficulties for churches wanting to disaffiliate and still retain their property and other assets.

Nunn said both St. Luke's and First Church are on a timeline to possibly exit the denomination at a special regional conference meeting in April or one scheduled for October. Churches whose members officially vote in favor of disaffiliation by at least 66.7%, and who have met apportionment payment requirements, will be eligible to have their disaffiliation formally ratified by conference delegates at one those special meetings.

## Exiting for different reasons

Both downtown churches appear to be moving toward disaffiliation for different reasons.

In January, the Rev. Bob Long, St. Luke's longtime senior minister, said his congregation is considering disaffiliation because it disagrees with the United Methodist Church's ban on same-sex marriage and ordination of gay clergy and wants to be inclusive to "all God's people." Long said St. Luke's also takes issue with how the denomination is structured, including its apportionment requirements.

By contrast, an individual privy to the situation at First Church said the congregation is considered one of the state's "traditionalist" churches that agrees with the United Methodist Church's prohibition on same-sex marriage and gay clergy. The individual, who wished to

remain anonymous, said the congregation is likely one of the more conservative United Methodist churches in Oklahoma.

The two churches each have an interesting history and possibly could have been one congregation, at one time.

According to church historians, Methodists met at Third and Broadway in Oklahoma City the Sunday after the Land Run of 1889 to discuss forming a Methodist church. They determined that part of the group was aligned with the Methodist Episcopal Church North while another faction was aligned with the Methodist Episcopal Church South. The two denominations had split in 1844 over the issue of slavery and episcopacy. While many historians have said most Methodists of the era held unfavorable views of the institution of slavery, the general consensus was that Methodist Episcopal Church South members were more willing to accommodate the institution while the Methodist Episcopal Church North sided with abolitionists.

By the second week after the Land Run, it was determined that there would be two Methodist churches. The people that formed what became St. Luke's were part of the Southern Methodist group and First Church's founders had ties to the Northern Methodist group. The two churches united under the same umbrella when Methodists in the North and South came back together in 1939. And both churches became part of the United Methodist denomination when it was formed in 1968.

The pair of churches have become well-known in Oklahoma. St. Luke's is widely known for its historic founding in 1889. Along with being the state's largest United Methodist church, it is one of the largest houses of worship of any faith group in Oklahoma, with more than 8,000 members. The church has several satellites, including one in Edmond, and is known for its outreach to the community at large and a commitment for remaining in the downtown area.

First Church is also considered one of the state's historic churches because of its longevity. It is widely known as the church whose sanctuary was destroyed in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing on April 19, 1995. The church, located adjacent to the federal building site (now site of the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum), met elsewhere until the sanctuary was rebuilt, making a conscious decision to remain in the downtown. In the bombing's aftermath, the congregation launched its Second Wind outreach ministry offering various support such as a pancake breakfast and Blessing of the Shoes for participants of the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon.

## **Bishop personally affected**

Nunn said he's concerned that the overall mission of the Church is being sidelined amid all of the disaffiliation efforts.

The most important thing at stake in this ongoing schism is the Church's focus on sharing the love of Christ and winning souls, he said. When asked what's at stake for the United Methodist Church — which is likely losing millions of dollars in property and thousands of church members — the bishop said he is more concerned that what's being lost are the connections among United Methodist churches and the relationships United Methodists have enjoyed with one another.

The bishop said disaffiliation matters have been painful for many people, including him. He said of five United Methodist churches in North Texas that he either attended growing up or pastored, only one has not disaffiliated.

"What's at stake is just the the damage and the hurt in relationships and friendships, and then our mutual ministry is damaged," he said. "Frankly, I think that when we focus on disaffiliation, we don't fulfill our mission — so our mission is damaged. And, whenever we are so focused on budgets and buildings and what are we going to get and what are we going to keep and all this — that is not what we're called to be."

On a more hopeful note, Nunn acknowledged that while the denomination would lose members, he said he envisioned that the Church also will gain some members and clergy. He said it may take 10 years or longer to see what the disaffiliation trend's full effect will have on the denomination.

And, he said, perhaps one day the disaffiliated will seek to return to the denomination.

Their denominational history tells modern-day United Methodists that this unity could happen, but it may take longer than anyone can foresee, the bishop said.

