

Eviction, church closure? Why an Oklahoma congregation worries it could happen to them

Regional United Methodist leaders weigh in as other church closures around U.S. are discussed.



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Members of a historic North Carolina church gathered to talk about the possibility of ending their affiliation with the United Methodist Church, but instead of the expected disaffiliation discussion, the congregation was shocked and "brokenhearted" to learn regional leaders were closing their house of worship.

Concerns that a similar scenario might play out at their downtown church prompted the congregation of First United Methodist-Oklahoma City to obtain a restraining order to keep regional denominational leaders from evicting them from their church building and closing its doors.

Recently, Oklahoma United Methodist Conference leaders appeared to alleviate First Church's fears that the historic church at 131 NW 4 might be shuttered as it seeks to separate.

"In the case of the current churches seeking disaffiliation, the Oklahoma Annual Conference has no plans to do that," regional leaders said regarding church closings. Leaders discussed the issue in a June 9 statement that, among other things, addressed First Church's fears about the church being closed.

First Church's successful request for a restraining order came on the heels of a lawsuit church trustees filed against the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference. In their suit, filed on June 1, trustees are asking an Oklahoma County District Court judge to sever the church's ties to the United Methodist Church, accusing regional leaders of preventing disaffiliation.

Hardy Patton, a First Church trustee, said the congregation had set a meeting to vote on disaffiliation in January, but it was postponed by regional leaders, including Oklahoma United Methodist Bishop Jimmy Nunn, because they wanted to conduct a viability study measuring the church's financial and ministerial effectiveness. In court documents, trustees accused regional leaders of using the viability study to "slow play" the congregation's efforts to disaffiliate so that the church would be unable to meet a critical year-end deadline to cut denominational ties while keeping their property and other assets.

More: United Methodists not first Oklahoma church to disaffiliate. How did others fare?

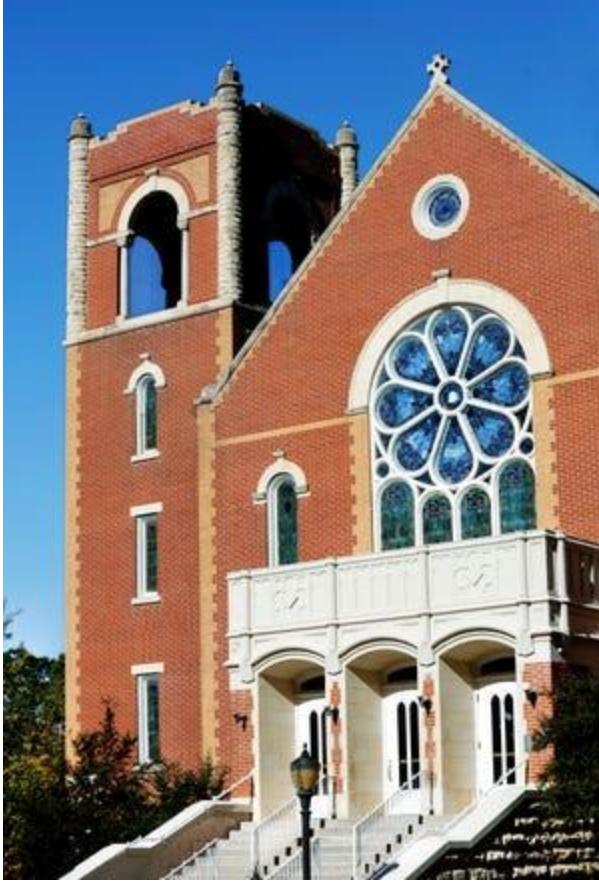
Regional leaders have denied First Church's allegations. They explained the viability study in a statement after The Oklahoman asked more information

about the process. They said the regional conference has requested that a study be conducted at multiple Oklahoma churches, and those requests were "fulfilled without complication" as a "routine" part of the process documents in the disaffiliation agreement.

Regional leaders would not disclose which Oklahoma churches, other than First Church, are in the viability study process. They said their goal is to present the appropriate study data to regional conference delegates as they consider ratifying disaffiliation requests of churches at a special meeting in October.

"In simple terms, if a viability study is done and the local church is deemed not to be viable, the local church will have three options: Continue the process of disaffiliation and seek ratification by the conference; discontinue the process of disaffiliation and remain UMC; close the church," regional affiliate leaders said in their statement.

"In all cases, the next step is in the control of the local church. It would be a rare and emergent circumstance that The Oklahoma Annual Conference would declare 'exigent circumstances' and close the church. In the case of the current churches seeking disaffiliation, the Oklahoma Annual Conference has no plans to do that."



How some other congregations have fared

The United Methodist Church — Oklahoma's second-largest faith group — is in the midst of a schism that has been gradually widening over the course of several decades. Disagreement about the scriptural compatibility of same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay clergy is at the heart of the divide. The issues are coming to a head for some churches, prompting them to seek to leave the denomination.

In their lawsuit, First Church trustees included information about a Georgia church that also sought the help of the courts to disaffiliate. In the spring,

Trinity on the Hill United Methodist in Augusta, Georgia, filed a lawsuit in Superior Court of Columbia County asking that a judge require the North Georgia United Methodist Conference to allow the church to proceed with the disaffiliation process.

Superior Court of Columbia County Judge Sheryl Jolly ruled that the court had jurisdiction over the matter and gave North Georgia regional conference leaders until May 16 to allow Trinity on the Hill to vote on disaffiliation. Jolly ruled that allowing the church to continue disaffiliation proceedings was part of the disaffiliation agreement outlined in Paragraph 2553 in the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline. The congregation sought to have its disaffiliation request considered at a June 1 North Georgia United Methodist Conference disaffiliation gathering.

According to the Augusta church's website, the congregation voted to end the church's affiliation with the United Methodist Church and their disaffiliation request was ratified by North Georgia conference.

Meanwhile, how realistic is the fear that regional United Methodist Church leaders would evict a congregation from their church building and close its doors as churches around the country exit the denomination?

It has happened to two churches in other states, the Rev. Jeffrey Rickman, a former Oklahoma United Methodist, said recently. He said the two congregations' fate may not represent a trend, but they are worth noting.

"I think the way I look at it right now, is I think that the groundwork has been laid in many annual conferences to do this if they so choose," he said. "They've been testing the waters."

Rickman was a licensed local pastor of a church in Nowata, Oklahoma, and another in Delaware, Oklahoma, which each disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church during a disaffiliation meeting in April in Oklahoma City. He recently joined a new conservative Methodist denomination, the Global Methodist Church, and the two churches he leads have done the same.

More:What happened when members of a new Methodist denomination gathered in the OKC metro area?

Rickman has been discussing disaffiliation matters in his "Plain Spoken" podcast that he started about six months ago, and he recently highlighted the closures of Fifth Avenue United Methodist Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, and and Struthers United Methodist in Struthers, Ohio. Each of the churches that were closed were given different reasons by regional leaders who decided to shut their doors in a manner the congregations considered abrupt. Only one, Fifth Avenue, a church with a 170-year history, had been interested in possibly pursuing disaffiliation.

"Fifth Avenue never asked for, agreed to or wanted the closure, nor were its members ever given a chance to participate in the decision to close the church down," Fifth Avenue leaders said in a news release in March. "It's members are devastated and brokenhearted by the closure which has been forced upon them."

Rickman said the factor the churches had in common was that their congregations were conservative. First Church is considered a United Methodist conservative congregation.

Rickman said the regional conferences of the two churches in North Carolina and Ohio appeared to utilize a part of the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline that discusses "exigent circumstances" for closing a church.