

Greed is at heart of delays, First Church alleges in lawsuit against United Methodist Church



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The congregation of a historic downtown Oklahoma City house of worship was granted a restraining order and filed a lawsuit asking an Oklahoma County judge to step in and end their affiliation with the United Methodist Church because regional leaders have prevented them from severing ties with the denomination.

"We really didn't want to go to the step of litigation with the conference, but we just felt like we were not given any option by the conference," Hardy Patton, a longtime First Church-OKC member who serves on the church's trustee committee, told The Oklahoman on Friday.

Thursday, First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City's trustees filed the suit against the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference in Oklahoma City District Court, arguing that the regional conference has violated its contract with the congregation by preventing the congregation's disaffiliation efforts to proceed.

What we know:Oklahoma churches seeking to cut ties with United Methodist denomination

The congregation also was granted a temporary restraining order Thursday to keep regional conference officials from locking church members out of their church building at 131 NW 4 and seizing more than \$30 million in property and assets while matters are sorted out in the courts.

"We allege their motive is greed," Patton said. "Our property, located in downtown Oklahoma City, is quite valuable and they do not want our congregation to have it."

The Oklahoma United Methodist Conference, led by Bishop Jimmy Nunn, denied the church's allegations in both a statement to the media and a letter sent on Friday to United Methodist churches across the state. Nunn is named as a defendant in the lawsuit, along with the Rev. Victor McCullough, the regional conference's Heartland District superintendent, and the conference's board of trustees. In their statement, conference leaders said the lawsuit is "legally unfounded" and contains "false and misleading accusations" against them.



Patton said the congregation felt forced to take up the issue in court. He said the church was going through the disaffiliation process as outlined by the regional conference and was just five days away from holding a congregational vote on disaffiliation in January when Nunn surprised church members by postponing the vote. Patton said Nunn and other regional conference leaders told church members that the conference wanted to conduct a study to determine whether or not the church was financially and ministerial "viable," and the majority of the congregation felt this turn of events was "disingenuous."

"We have attempted to fully participate in the disaffiliation process, as laid out by the Book of Discipline's Paragraph 2553 that was passed in 2019, so we expected when we started this process, that just like the other 84 churches that had been allowed to disaffiliate, we would be able to vote and go through the process and disaffiliation, if that was our choice," he said.

Patton said church members took an unofficial vote on the matter of disaffiliation shortly after their official vote was postponed and 75% of the congregation voted in favor of cutting ties with the United Methodist Church. In the broader Oklahoma United Methodist community, First Church (its informal name) is considered a traditionalist congregation which agrees with the United Methodist Church's ban on same-sex marriage and gay ordination, outlined in the denomination's Book of Discipline, a policy book.

As matters stand, Patton said the congregation thinks that without the regional conference's recent actions, First Church would have been among the churches whose disaffiliation requests were ratified by regional conference

delegates in April. Those churches were considered officially disaffiliated on May 6.

Patton said First Church decided not to take its concerns to the United Methodist Church's Judicial Council because members didn't feel the matter was an ecclesiastical issue.

"We believe that this is more about property rights and the conference's violation of their contract with us, which is basically the Book of Discipline — their breach of fiduciary duty to us," he said. "If they were to deem us nonviable, the conference stands in line to inherit this property and if this church is closed for any reason, including viability — and that's just at the sole discretion of the conference — then this building, all of our assets, financial and otherwise, would go to the conference."



Conference leaders disagreed with First Church's assessment of the situation.

"There should be no misunderstanding," conference leaders said in their statement. "This lawsuit seeks the intervention of Oklahoma courts into matters of church law, doctrine, and administration, and the disaffiliation process at issue is part of the polity and policy of the United Methodist Church. The courts have no role to play in the management of church affairs including local church disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church. The Oklahoma Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church will vigorously defend its own First Amendment rights as a religious organization and encourages other bodies of faith to closely monitor this litigation, as it is potentially impactful on all people of faith regardless of creed."

Along those lines, conference leaders said McCullough, as the church's district superintendent, had the right to have a viability study conducted on the church as a matter of church law and practice. The regional affiliate's leaders said First Church is attempting to avoid the scrutiny that a study on the church's financial and ministerial viability would bring.

Conference leaders also said the study doesn't prevent the church from having a disaffiliation vote. They said First Church's "unnecessary litigation" – not the viability study – "is most likely to slow down the disaffiliation process."

Conference leaders said viability studies have been conducted at other churches, but Patton said he and other members of First Church think this assertion is untrue and their church has been singled out as a way of stalling its efforts to sever ties.

What are United Methodist churches splitting over?

First Church's lawsuit is the latest development in a schism in the United Methodist Church that is playing out across the globe over disagreements about the spiritual compatibility of same-sex marriage and gay ordination.

Most of the 84 Oklahoma churches that have disaffiliated from the United Methodist denomination since October 2022 were, like First Church, in step with the faith group's ban on same-sex marriage and gay ordination. Many of them still wanted to cut ties with the United Methodist Church because of their perception that the ban may be overturned in the near future and the denomination will head in a more liberal direction that they oppose.

One outlier, for the moment, is St. Luke's United Methodist, whose Oklahoma City campus at 222 NW 15 was also considered a United Methodist presence in the downtown area. The congregation's disaffiliation request was ratified in April after the congregation voted in favor of severing ties because it disagreed with the United Methodist Church's prohibition against same-sex marriage and gay ordination, and the penalties for violators of the ban, which the church considered too harsh, as compared to penalties for other offenses.

How timing affects property in the United Methodist schism

The United Methodist denomination is seeing churches leaving in fairly large groups in places like Oklahoma and other states because the congregations want to exit with their property and assets before the Book of Discipline's Paragraph 2553 provision allowing them to do so ends on Dec. 31, 2023. Nunn has said the third of three special disaffiliation meetings will be in October. In their statement, he and other conference leaders said First Church could potentially be among the churches seeking to have their disaffiliation requests ratified by conference delegates at that meeting, as long as the downtown church has met all requirements.

Patton said the insurance value of First Church's property at NW 4 and Robinson is about \$20 million, and then there is land, as well as other assets. He said most of the church's assets are tied up in the historic building. Oklahoma County tax records show the NW 4 and Robinson church property is owned by the First United Methodist Church, and has a taxable market value of \$0. Because the property is owned by a religious organization, it is

exempted under Oklahoma law from being assessed for the purpose of paying property taxes.

Patton said about 80 people attended First Church's weekend services. He said the church pays for the maintenance of its building and operations and doesn't seek financial assistance from the regional conference



First Church's ties from the Land Run to the OKC bombing

The church's history has been interwoven with Oklahoma and Oklahoma City history since 1889.

"We were founded six days after the Land Run in 1889 so we've been around since Oklahoma Territory and had 17 charter members," Patton said. "Back that summer, we were considered 'viable' with 17 members and now we've grown to this vibrant community with activity that you see on a daily basis."

"We've stood shoulder to shoulder, I think, with the city for all of these years, through multiple wars and conflicts and the Great Depression, all the way to churches choosing to leave to the suburbs," Patton said. "And First Church chose not to do that, which became a question for us after the Oklahoma City bombing."

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

Patton referred to the destruction of First Church's sanctuary in the 1995 bombing. The church building sustained significant damage due to its location adjacent to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The church's senior pastor at the time, the Rev. Nick Harris, led the congregation through the upheaval of having to hold worship services elsewhere in the aftermath of the bombing.

At the time, Harris said the church considered moving to suburban areas, but the congregation decided to rebuild its sanctuary in order to stay downtown because of its commitment to the area.

Over the years, the church has had many outreach programs, including Harris' popular Loaves and Fishes Bible study.

Patton said more recently, First Church opened its doors to the Christ Experience, a smaller United Methodist congregation that sought a place to worship after selling its building in northeast Oklahoma City.

Notably, First Church is well known for its Second Wind Ministry, which includes a free community pancake breakfast on the morning of the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon.

That ministry connected to the marathon also includes a prayer service at the Survivor Tree, and a Blessing of the Shoes and Gloves worship service for marathon participants.

Patton said the congregation wants to continue these ministry efforts and to just be allowed to choose its future course, as other churches have done.

"We would love for the court to rule and that we would be deemed disaffiliated as if we had done so in this past (disaffiliation) cycle," he said. "We just want to be allowed to leave in peace and continue the ministry efforts here at First Church. We don't have any animosity, we just want to be allowed to disaffiliate."

Contributing: Staff writer Jack Money