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RELIGION

Why the debate on whether to leave can be more intense among suburban UMC churches

Most churches leaving the United Methodist Church amid a splintering are in rural areas and the membership overwhelmingly supports disaffiliation. So what happens at a suburban church?



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Key Points

Majority of churches leaving the United Methodist Church are in rural areas and the membership is small and overwhelmingly supportive of disaffiliating.

At UMC churches in suburban and urban areas dealing with questions of disaffiliation, there is less consensus among members and the votes for disaffiliation are closer.

Here are the stories of a Franklin church that disaffiliated and a Collierville church that did not...

Winston Baccus and his wife were prepared to leave the church they called home for 18 years if the congregation overwhelmingly supported splitting from the United Methodist Church.

But a congregation-wide survey found only 49% of Collierville UMC members would vote for the church to disaffiliate from the denomination, a pleasant surprise to a group Baccus helped form a few months prior.

“We decided, ‘Let’s do something, let’s not just allow this to happen. Somebody has got to be the group that speaks out for staying United Methodist,’” Baccus said. “Because our pastors and staff decided to be neutral.”

More than 3,000 congregations have disaffiliated from the UMC since 2019 amid a splintering following disagreements over theology and church policy, including dealing with

LGBTQ rights. Many are joining the Global Methodist Church, a more conservative breakaway denomination.

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A church fully disaffiliates following a vote among the congregation and then ratification by voting delegates within the annual conference, or the regional UMC authority.

The survey results showed the group Baccus helped lead, called Stay UMC Collierville, had a chance. So, they dug in their heels and doubled their advocacy against disaffiliation ahead of a Feb. 26 congregation vote. An opposing group called Traditional Collierville Disciples, did the same.

“We were a little bit afraid by the numbers that showed up,” Baccus said about the Feb. 26 vote. “It was super close.”

Out of 773 total votes, 493 were in favor of disaffiliation and 280 were against. But disaffiliation proponents were 25 votes short of the required two-thirds majority.

Unlike Collierville UMC, 162 congregations in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference voted for disaffiliation. Conference delegates will vote on ratifying those disaffiliations at a special session on Saturday.

The struggle Collierville UMC faced is a minority of cases. Most churches disaffiliating from the UMC are in rural areas and the membership is small, largely conservative, and overwhelmingly supportive of disaffiliation.

It's the churches in more suburban and urban areas where there is less consensus among the congregation and thus a tighter margin when it makes a final determination. Often, the group of members who don't get their way end up leaving.

Still, there some high-profile cases of large congregations leaving that are in Georgia, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma have left the denomination, and the largest one in South Carolina is considering the same.

Thirteen percent of all churches that have disaffiliated from the UMC are in more densely populated areas, according to Lovett Weems, emeritus distinguished professor at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. By comparison, 23% of all UMC congregations are in more densely populated areas.

“There are going to be more urban and suburban churches that leave,” said Weems, who oversees a study of disaffiliating churches for Wesley Seminary’s center for church leadership. “But I think the proportions are going to probably stay about the same.”

Those who didn't leave because the church did

If not for one vote, the Rev. Sam Clarke would have left Trinity Methodist Church if it hadn’t disaffiliated a year ago.

“The vote was in his (God’s) hands,” said Clarke, who pastors the church in Franklin.

The congregation voted 25-11 to disaffiliate in April 2022. Then, Tennessee-Western Kentucky delegates voted to ratify disaffiliations for Trinity and 59 other congregations at a meeting last June.

2022 Tennessee disaffiliations: As United Methodists in Tennessee navigate schism, 60 churches leave denomination

Making sense of 2022 disaffiliations: With a historic number of churches leaving, why 2022 was so dramatic for United Methodists

One of the first suburban churches in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference to disaffiliate, Trinity was unique in that its rift wasn’t over ideological differences, rather timing and procedure.

“I was not in favor of them leaving the denomination,” said the Rev. Ricky Lee, Trinity’s former pastor and the current pastor of LaVergne UMC. “I understood their sentiments. But I felt like Trinity and other churches that have left are jumping the gun because nothing has changed in our discipline.”

Lee started at Trinity in 2020 and left the church after the April 2022 vote for disaffiliation. Lee is conservative and doesn’t see disaffiliation as necessary because the UMC continues to hold more conservative policies on ordaining LGBTQ clergy and permission for clergy to perform same-sex weddings. Pro-disaffiliation traditionalists have criticized the degree to which UMC leaders are enforcing those policies.

But Clarke, who joined Trinity in 2021 as a member with his wife, didn’t want to wait. Part of his reasoning stemmed from when he was a second career Episcopal priest at a time the Episcopal Church was dealing with its own schism.

So, he took the initiative to learn about the disaffiliation process and educate his fellow congregants about it. The group was able to get a congregation vote on the calendar. Meanwhile, they culled outdated member rolls and notified every voting eligible member about the April 2022 vote.

“I had no idea which way it was going to go,” Clarke said. “Because some of the people we encouraged to come ended up voting the other way.”

At the same time, a man who lives in Florida and doesn’t regularly attend Trinity, but qualified as an eligible voting member, drove up to Franklin to cast his vote for disaffiliation.

“If he hadn’t made that trip, we wouldn’t be sitting here right now and I would be in a different church,” Clarke said.

While Clarke stayed, Lee and others who opposed disaffiliation did not.

“I felt like I had some gifts and abilities to help a church and I wanted to be in a United Methodist congregation,” Lee said. That’s when he asked for conference officials to reassign him, leading to his current position at LaVergne First UMC.

After, Trinity members appointed Clarke as their interim pastor and in January made his post permanent. Also, instead of joining the Global Methodist Church, Trinity decided to remain independent, which Weems said is more common for suburban and urban disaffiliating churches.

Trinity still uses the UMC Book of Discipline as a framework to guide its decisions. The church also is exploring opportunities to collaborate with other independent or newly disaffiliated churches.

“People are focused not on disaffiliation, not on divisive issues,” Clarke said. “The main thing now is the health of the congregation.”

Those who left because the church didn't

Hundreds left Collierville UMC after the failed congregation vote this past February. It wasn’t entirely surprising, but still had a huge impact.

The congregation survey, circulated by a church-led group called the discernment committee, found that 30% of members would leave if the church did not disaffiliate. The discernment committee was responsible for disaffiliation-related business at Collierville UMC, starting its work in early 2022.

The survey also found 69% of respondents held traditional views on LGBTQ-related issues, though only 49% supported disaffiliation.

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The 13-member discernment committee circulated the survey to guide its decision-making and in December voted 11-2 to schedule the Feb. 26 congregation vote.

“Despite the fact that the survey shows that there is not enough support for disaffiliation, the committee decided that several more weeks of this mess is preferable to admitting reality,” Baccus said in a Stay UMC Collierville post on Facebook in December.

As Baccus predicted, it got messier.

In concert with congregants’ support for disaffiliation, some staff began speaking up. The worship pastor, the Rev. Eddie Bromley, expressed his intent to eventually turn in his UMC clergy credentials in a January letter to the church’s senior pastor, the Rev. Deborah Suddarth.

Meanwhile, Suddarth planned to request a reassignment if the church voted for disaffiliation.

Throughout the process, “Yes, I was still mentally and physically exhausted,” Suddarth said in a statement to The Tennessean. “Spiritually, I knew that God was amidst the situation no matter how it turned out.”

When the Feb. 26 vote happened and ultimately failed, Suddarth and Bromley jointly sought to reassure the congregation.

“Some will choose to leave quickly, yet again, we ask for you to have patience,” Bromley and Suddarth said in a Feb. 27 letter. “Give your church a chance. Everyone on both sides of the vote feels a deep pain right now and you are not alone.”

But a week later, the Collierville Traditional Disciples organizers started a new church, First Methodist Collierville, that saw 300-plus people at its first service. Soon after, Bromley joined the church as its first pastor.

Bromley and other First Methodist Collierville leaders declined to comment.

'Peace in that building'

There have been similar fissures like that of Collierville UMC.

The largest UMC congregation in Arkansas, Fayetteville Central UMC, was unsuccessful in its effort to disaffiliate, causing most of the members and some staff to leave and start a new church. Also, a satellite campus splintered off so it could leave the UMC.

In other cases, it's more decisive. At Christ Church Memphis, a congregation with deep ties to the conservative Methodist movement, 90% of 1,043 total votes were in favor of disaffiliation. Christ Church is among the list of churches Tennessee-Western Kentucky delegates will vote on ratifying on Saturday.

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Collierville UMC won't be on that list and because of that, the church is picking up the pieces.

"We're very sad that there's a lot of people that my wife and I both loved that we're not worshiping with anymore," Baccus said in an interview.

Collierville UMC has had to adjust its budget and make strategic cuts in staffing as part of budget adjustments, Suddarth said in a statement.

At the same time, Collierville UMC would have been adjusting in different ways if the conflict ended in a successful disaffiliation.

In fact, Suddarth said 39 new members have recently joined the church.

During the disaffiliation conflict at Collierville UMC, Baccus said there was a book popular among some disaffiliation proponents titled, "Are We Really Better Together?" Baccus countered by answering the question, "yes."

"But I think what this experience taught me is the answer may be no," Baccus said in an interview. "Maybe we have to go our separate ways."

It may have created new problems for Collierville UMC, Baccus added. "But right now, there is peace in that building."

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