

Future for First Church uncertain after Oklahoma Supreme Court grants emergency stay



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Plans for an unprecedented special meeting of United Methodists and former United Methodists have been canceled.

The fate of the special disaffiliation gathering tentatively scheduled for Saturday had been up in the air for several days. The meeting had been called for the specific purpose of considering the disaffiliation request of First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City.

Wednesday, the Oklahoma Supreme Court granted the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's request for an emergency stay of a judge's order, pending the outcome of an appeal. The conference is appealing Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia Timmons' ruling in favor of First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City, 131 NW 4.

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Timmons had ordered conference leaders to hold a special disaffiliation meeting by Aug. 6 to allow First Church's exit request to be considered. The conference balked at the idea, claiming that conference staff had little time to prepare for such a gathering and delegates expected to attend the meeting were given short notice. Conference leaders also said having people who are no longer United Methodists vote on disaffiliation is against the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline, a policy book.

Ross Plourde, the conference's attorney, also said First Church would not be harmed by waiting for the state Supreme Court to resolve the matter because the congregation has until Dec. 31 to have its request to sever ties considered under a special provision in the Book of Discipline

In their statement on Wednesday, conference leaders said oral arguments before the Oklahoma Supreme Court will begin on Aug. 22.

"The Oklahoma Annual Conference is thankful for the Order today of the Oklahoma Supreme Court that grants an emergency stay which effectively stops the court-ordered annual conference that was scheduled for this Saturday," conference leaders said.

"We believe the lower court's decision on July 17th took away the rights of the 365 local churches and the thousands of members of this annual conference to live out their faith as they see fit through the self-governance of their denomination of faithful believers. The ruling had also directed the Oklahoma Annual Conference to conduct its meetings in a manner that is contrary to the UMC's governing laws and Constitution."

First Church disappointed by stay

The granting of the emergency stay on Wednesday effectively gave conference leaders the latitude to cancel the special meeting that was essentially a do-over of a disaffiliation meeting held in April.

The conference had set the meeting for Saturday at Oklahoma City University. In her ruling for First Church, Timmons said conference leaders prevented the First Church congregation from having their disaffiliation request considered in April alongside 55 Oklahoma churches who severed ties with the United Methodist Church at that time. The special meeting was to include delegates from remaining United Methodist churches as well as delegates from the 55 churches that disaffiliated in order to recreate, as much as possible, the same circumstances First Church would have faced in April.

Monday, Timmons rejected the conference's request to put her ruling on hold, pending the outcome of the conference's appeal to the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

The cancellation of Saturday's special meeting was not the news that the First Church congregation had hoped to hear, Hardy Patton, a First Church trustee, said Wednesday.

"We are disappointed that the annual conference will not occur on Saturday," he said in a statement. "That said, our congregation is resolute and we look forward to vindicating our property rights. We want to express again our

gratitude for the many people who are supporting us. Our God Reigns and We Will Remain."

Attorneys for First Church have long argued that the historic church which formed six days after the 1889 Land Run was singled out by conference leaders by requiring a viability study of the church's finances and ministry that was not required of the 55 churches that severed ties in April or 29 churches that disaffiliated in October 2022.

Patton has said the congregation believed conference leaders ultimately wanted to gain First Church's roughly \$30 million in assets and property, including the church building at the corner of NW 4 and Robinson in downtown Oklahoma City.

This assertion strikes at the heart of the matter because First Church trustees filed suit on June 1 because they believed that conference leaders created the viability study requirement as a disaffiliation roadblock. The church had hoped to sever ties in April, long before the special United Methodist Book of Discipline provision known as Paragraph 2553 ends on Dec. 31. This provision allows United Methodist congregations to disaffiliate and keep their church property and assets, as long as certain disaffiliation requirements are met.

Prior to First Church's lawsuit, Oklahoma United Methodist Bishop Jimmy Nunn had set a third and final special disaffiliation meeting for October to consider more churches' exit requests.

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