

Special United Methodist disaffiliation meeting to go on after judge refuses to halt order

United Methodist leaders must continue with special exit meeting, pending appeal



Carla Hinton

The Oklahoman

[View Comments](#)



A special United Methodist disaffiliation meeting is still on after a judge refused to stay her ruling in a local church's exit dispute.

The meeting, currently set for Saturday, is essentially a do-over of a gathering held in April when 55 Oklahoma churches severed ties with the United Methodist Church.

Monday, Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia Timmons rejected the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's request to put her ruling in favor of First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City on hold, pending the outcome of the conference's appeal to the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

Trustees of First Church, 131 NW 4, filed a lawsuit against the regional conference in June, claiming that conference leaders deliberately prevented the First Church congregation from severing denominational ties in April alongside the 55 other churches.

More: First Church-OKC exit case continues with focus on mission, members and mixed messages

In her July 17 ruling, Timmons ordered the regional conference, led by Bishop Jimmy Nunn, to hold such a special meeting by Aug. 6 to allow United Methodist delegates to consider First Church's disaffiliation request.

Timmons heard arguments by Ross Plourde, the conference's attorney, during Monday's brief hearing and ruled against the conference's stay request without further comment on the matter. Her decision means conference leaders must invite to Saturday's special meeting delegates from the 55 churches that disaffiliated in April. They will join delegates from the remaining 365 United Methodist churches across the state in considering First Church's request. In her ruling, Timmons said the special meeting would be a way to recreate the conditions of the April meeting to give First Church the same opportunity it would have been given had it been allowed to seek disaffiliation at the spring gathering.

Attorney says ruling harms conference

The First Church dispute is among the latest developments in an ongoing rift occurring in the United Methodist Church over disagreements about the spiritual compatibility of same-sex marriage and gay ordination. Thus far, 84 Oklahoma churches have cut ties with the denomination since 2022. The vast majority of the Oklahoma houses of worship headed for the exit because, although they agree with the United Methodist ban on same-sex marriage and gay ordination, they think the denomination is headed in a more liberal direction. First Church, which was started a few days after the 1889 Land Run, is considered one of these conservative churches.

Plourde argued the regional conference would be substantially harmed if it had to comply with Timmons' order for the special disaffiliation meeting

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

He said conference leaders and staff have only had 19 days to prepare for such a meeting. He also said delegates being asked to return to consider First Church's disaffiliation request weren't being given much time to make plans to attend the special gathering. Plourde 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.

Cara Nicklas, one of First Church's attorneys, disagreed and said Timmons' decision on Monday did not surprise her because timing is critical for First Church. The church's trustees filed suit because they believe the conference leaders created a disaffiliation roadblock for the church when they said a study on the church's financial and ministerial viability would be required before their exit request was considered. The church wanted to sever ties as soon as possible before a special United Methodist Book of Discipline provision ends on Dec. 31. This provision allows congregations to disaffiliate and keep their church property and assets, as long as certain disaffiliation requirements are met.

More:Exclusive: First Church files suit over property

"She had three days of hearing testimony, and I think she feels like a stay would have been essentially a reversal of her decision. And, after three days of testimony, I don't think she wanted to reverse her decision," Nicklas said of Timmons. "She recognized there's urgency for First Church to be able to be considered for disaffiliation."

Monday, a conference spokesman said the conference planned to go to the Oklahoma Supreme Court to seek an emergency stay of Timmons' ruling until the matter could be resolved by the appellate court. He said the conference plans to proceed with the special meeting on Saturday unless the appellate court issues an emergency stay.