

United Methodist loyalists back in church building in Jonesboro

by [Frank E. Lockwood](#) | Today at 2:43 a.m.

•
•

Follow



Members of the congregation who remain loyal to their denomination are now in possession of First United Methodist Church property in Jonesboro. Those favoring disaffiliation surrendered the building to the loyalists this week. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette file photo)

After meeting elsewhere for months, denominational loyalists took possession Monday of First United Methodist Church in downtown Jonesboro.

Special Judge Gary Arnold had ordered the previous occupants to get out by this past Tuesday, finding that they were no longer affiliated with either the denomination or the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Those previously in possession, who now call themselves First Methodist Church, noted that the congregation had voted 944 to 412 to sever ties. They argued that they were entitled to the property, despite Arkansas conference members failing to ratify the disaffiliation.

Arnold, who was assigned the case after local judges recused, expressed skepticism about that point, finding that breakaway congregants were "not likely to succeed on the merits" if the matter proceeds to trial.

Before the split, Jonesboro First United Methodist Church was the state's second-largest United Methodist congregation.

Arnold, a retired circuit judge from Central Arkansas, gave temporary possession of the property to the Arkansas conference, which backs the pro-United Methodist remnant. Sunday morning, the loyalists met a final time in a borrowed Presbyterian sanctuary, then boxed up their red Methodist hymnals and departed; they met again on Thursday night, for a "Service of Blessing and Music" at the century-old Methodist church on Main Street.

Worship services, for now, will be at 9:45 a.m. Sundays. "Sunday School and other important church activities will resume as soon as possible," congregants were told. Last month, they put out a call for volunteers to serve as ushers, greeters, Sunday School teachers and nursery workers; a number of people answered the call.

Weekly attendance, while the group was in exile, has averaged about 150, despite an 8:45 a.m. starting time, according to newly appointed pastor David Hoffman.

"We're about to embark on something really, really big again," he told worshippers Sunday, adding "We might be small but we can have a huge, huge impact."

Over on Main Street, crowds were bigger and options more plentiful, with a traditional service at 11 and contemporary services at 8:30, 9:45, and 11:11 a.m.

Congregants at Sunday's traditional service sang "This Is a Day of New Beginnings," rejoiced in the baptisms of four young people and took Holy Communion in the building for a final time.

In all, 1,277 people attended the Sunday services, according to Senior Pastor John Miles. Beginning this Sunday, First Methodist Church will hold services at Arkansas State University's Fowler Center, with contemporary services at 9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. in Riceland Hall and a traditional service at 11 a.m. in the Drama Theatre.

Not all of those on hand this past Sunday will be joining the exodus.

"Some of our traditional people, that's our smaller service, and some of them will be staying. But we suspect most of that 1,200 [who attended Sunday] will be going with us," he said.

For some, Hoffman said, the church on Main Street will always be home.

"We've been contacted by some of the folks who have been continuing to worship [there] during all of the difficulties and they're going to remain [there]. This was the church they grew up in. This is the church they've been a part of for years and they're going to stay," he said.

Meanwhile, the litigation continues.

"We're not giving up, you know. We still are in the fight in terms of the facility, but we're moving on," Miles said. "If we get back in the building, that'll be fine. If we don't, that'll be fine."

Hoffman said he's eager to move ahead.

"This is a new beginning," he said.

He is committed to welcoming all, he added.

"When I first came here, what I told the folks is that I believe in an open, inclusive, all-embracing church and I'm going to stand by that. I will not compromise on that issue," he said.

Miles said his congregation will focus on Jesus and won't dwell on the past.

"As long as we don't look back, we're fine. [If] we start looking at what we've lost, we're sad, but I think a lot of people, including myself, are pretty excited," he said.

Normally, United Methodist congregations hold their property in trust for the entire denomination.

Paragraph 2553 of the denomination's Book of Discipline, approved in 2019 at a special session of its General Conference in St. Louis, allowed local churches to disaffiliate if they were dissatisfied with the denomination's stand on issues such as same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay clergy.

A supermajority vote by a congregation -- two-thirds or more -- is required before it can proceed with the process.

Since its passage, at least 6,179 congregations have successfully disaffiliated -- roughly 1 out of every 5 United Methodist churches in the United States.

That includes 107 in Arkansas. Three others -- in Jonesboro, Searcy and Cabot -- were denied disaffiliation after objections were raised at a special session of the church's Arkansas Annual Conference.

In Cabot, the church split, with a majority breaking away to form an independent congregation. Searcy First United Methodist Church filed suit, eventually reaching a settlement with the conference.

The Jonesboro lawsuit is the only one unresolved.

Print Headline: United Methodist loyalists back in church