

NEWS

# An OKC church wants a second chance to vote on leaving United Methodist Church

*Church of the Servant thinks regional disaffiliation deadlines have been arbitrarily set*



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Some members of a local house of worship don't know where their congregation currently stands on the question of leaving the United Methodist Church, but they do know they want a second opportunity to vote on the matter.

Church of the Servant, 14343 N MacArthur Blvd., is taking the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference to court on Friday hoping that a judge will order conference leaders to allow the church to hold a timely congregational disaffiliation vote, which is a key aspect of the exit process.

Monica Wittrock, a local attorney serving on the Church of the Servant church council, said the church's lawsuit filed in Oklahoma County District Court stems from a dispute that arose after the church held a disaffiliation vote in September 2022. The church was one of the largest — and first — United Methodist congregations in Oklahoma to take an exit vote that year but fell shy of the required two-thirds majority to disaffiliate by only two votes.

Wittrock said some church members have asked conference leaders for an opportunity to hold a second disaffiliation vote. She said a conference leader's decision to deny another vote is essentially an effort to prevent the congregation from disaffiliating.



Wittrock also said some church members think the conference's motivation in denying a second vote is so the conference may acquire the sprawling Church of the Servant building and property near the Kilpatrick Turnpike and MacArthur Boulevard in northwest Oklahoma City.

She said the church council felt it was an "uphill battle and the clock was ticking" when they asked conference leaders for a second disaffiliation vote.

"So, we feel like we have an obligation to the congregation to pursue it," Wittrock said of the court case.

As a Church of the Servant member for the last 45 years, Wittrock, 66, said she's not sure how she will vote on disaffiliation, but she and many others want another chance to consider the move.

"I think to me, this is as an important decision today as it was when I was 12 years old and I went through confirmation," she said. "During confirmation in the Methodist Church, you do a lot of studying leading up to your decision to

become a United Methodist. This decision whether to remain United Methodist is every bit as important. We'd like to have that opportunity to decide."

**More:** [A look at the United Methodist split in Oklahoma](#)

## **Not everyone in church congregation agrees to lawsuit**

Meanwhile, not everyone at Church of the Servant is onboard with the lawsuit. Don Wentroth, another church council member, said he doesn't see any need for another disaffiliation vote.

The adjunct college professor and retired high school principal said he's been a member of the church for 26 years, and he doesn't agree with the idea of taking a church matter to civil court.

"I voted against suing the conference because I don't think that's what Jesus would want in this situation," Wentroth said.



"I don't see him suing people. I see him changing people's minds by the words he used, and if he didn't like what was going on, he just moved along to people who agreed with his way of thinking. I don't agree with paying attorneys. I don't think it belongs in the civil court."

Wenthroth, 69, said he knows that church members behind the lawsuit view the disaffiliation dispute as a property matter, but he disagrees with that reasoning.

"I think the church belongs to God. I don't believe it is our property," he said. "I believe we are stewards of that property and the tithes and offerings that the congregation has given in the past to purchase the land to buy the furniture, and all of that, I think that is money that we have given for God's purposes and I don't see that it's our property to begin with."





## **Lawsuits are just latest in growing schism in United Methodist Church**

Church of the Servant is the second house of worship to file suit against the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference regarding disaffiliation matters. First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City, 131 NW 4, also took its disaffiliation disagreement to civil court.

Both disaffiliation disputes are among the latest developments in an ongoing schism in the United Methodist Church over disagreements about the spiritual compatibility of same-sex marriage and gay ordination.

So 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 Church's current prohibition on same-sex marriage and gay ordination, they think the denomination is headed in a liberal direction. These conservative churches generally are known in the United Methodist realm as traditionalist churches.

Church of the Servant's congregation includes traditionalists, but it is unclear how many members are a part of this faction.

In 2019, a special provision was added to the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline by the denomination's General Conference. Known as Paragraph 2553, the special provision was approved to give a "gracious exit" to churches in disagreement over human sexuality. As part of this special provision, churches wishing to exit have until Dec. 31 to take part in a special disaffiliation process allowing them to sever ties and take their church properties and assets with them.

**Two OK UMC court cases:** What we know about Oklahoma United Methodist disaffiliation court cases

## **Should one United Methodist leader have final say?**

Wittrock said a key issue for Church of the Servant is that a district superintendent for the regional conference, the Rev. Sam Powers, has turned down the church council's request for a second disaffiliation vote. She said there had been hopes to conduct the vote so that the church could possibly have its disaffiliation request considered by regional conference delegates at a special meeting in October.

Wittrock said church members began talking about having a second vote almost immediately after their first vote in 2022. She said many of them have become better educated about the disaffiliation and related issues, and they think they are prepared to vote again on exiting.

The church council leader said the congregation learned in May that Powers would have final say on whether they would be given an opportunity to vote again. They then learned that conference leaders had given congregations until Sept. 6 to hold the required discernment meetings and congregational disaffiliation votes in order to have their exit requests ratified by delegates in October.

Conference leaders also informed the church that congregations must wait 12 months before holding another congregational vote if their first vote fell shy of the required two-third majority. Under this requirement, Church of the Servant would have to wait until Sept. 11, 2023 — one year from its 2022 congregational vote — to hold another vote, which would mean the church would miss the conference's Sept. 6 deadline.

Wittrock said the church has learned within the last several days that Powers ultimately has decided not to allow the congregation another vote.

"There were so many people who felt like they have been silenced and didn't have that opportunity to have a second vote and that's not just those who wanted to disaffiliate, but it's all those that are in the middle, like I am," she said. "And I can tell you to this day, I don't know how I'll vote, but we want that opportunity to talk to our brothers and sisters in Christ, to get a better idea about what our future might look like. That's all we're wanting — an opportunity to discern our future together."

For his part, Wentroth said he thinks it's too bad that some people are unhappy with the current state of affairs.

"I just think we've wandered and gotten off track about what our purposes are in a Christian church," he said. "We need to be focused on worshiping God and loving each other and taking care of each other. Sometimes I understand there's some tough love as well and I think that's OK, but we're spending an awful lot of energy and emotion. I just hate to see friends and people angry with each other and I just don't see that as God's will for people."



**Exit vote decided by two:** United Methodist Church of the Servant disaffiliation vote was decided by only a few people

