

LIFESTYLE

Exit signs: What we learned from testimony in two Oklahoma United Methodist civil cases

What we learned from Oklahoma United Methodist court testimony



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First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City, 131 NW 4, and Church of the Servant, 14343 N MacArthur, have each had their disaffiliation cases considered in Oklahoma County District Court.

Both cases stemmed from a special provision that was added to the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline in 2019 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.

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

Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia Timmons ruled in favor of First Church and Church of the Servant in their separate cases. The Oklahoma United Methodist Conference is appealing Timmons' ruling regarding First Church and plans are being made to file an appeal against the judge's ruling in the Church of the Servant case.

Here's what we have learned from testimony in both church cases.

45-47 Oklahoma churches are in discernment/disaffiliation process

There are between 45 and 47 Oklahoma churches across the state currently in various stages of the discernment/disaffiliation process, with an eye on possibly having disaffiliation requests ratified at a special Oklahoma United Methodist Conference meeting set for Oct. 13-14. The number of disaffiliating-seeking churches was provided through the testimony of two conference leaders, Oklahoma United Methodist Bishop Jimmy Nunn and the Rev. Tish Malloy, the conference's director of transitional ministries. So far,

84 churches already have disaffiliated from the Oklahoma Conference, and Nunn has said the October meeting will be the final opportunity for churches to end their affiliation with the United Methodist Church under the Paragraph 2553 provision.

Testimony revealed possibility of moving conference office

Malloy said conference leaders have previously discussed moving the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference office to a local church, in light of the fact that Oklahoma Conference will be "smaller," meaning the number of churches in the conference has decreased due to disaffiliations. First Church and Church of the Servant leaders felt this testimony was particularly revealing because the churches' lawsuits against the conference were filed based on their claims that their houses of worship were being unfairly targeted and prevented from taking key steps toward disaffiliation — all because conference leaders hoped to seize the churches' valuable property.

In his testimony in the First Church case, the Rev. Derrek Belase, the conference's director of connectional ministries, said he and some other conference leaders had been concerned that "our downtown witness is shifting," but the conference was not planning to close First Church, seize the property or expel its congregation. A spokesman for the conference pushed back at this idea, saying there has been no official discussion about moving the conference office.

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

Superintendents have played key roles on votes

Decisions by Oklahoma United Methodist Conference district superintendents have played a key role in both the First Church and Church of the Servant cases. In the Church of the Servant case, the Rev. Sam Powers, Heartland

District superintendent, was accused of being biased against the disaffiliation process. He testified that he did not agree with the disaffiliations and that his mindset was bent on remaining United Methodist but he treated Church of the Servant fairly. Notably, Bishop Nunn said he supported Powers. Powers disagreed with Church of the Servant's assertion that the congregation did not have a second disaffiliation vote because they had a vote on Sept. 11, 2022, that failed to meet the required two-thirds majority for disaffiliation and then, they had a "vote of reconsideration" held on the same day, which also failed to meet the required majority by two votes. Powers also said two Church of the Servant pastors told him on separate occasions that the disaffiliation vote in 2022 had been harmful to the congregation.

In the First Church case, the Rev. Victor McCullough, former Crossroads District superintendent, set a date for the church's disaffiliation vote before he and Nunn ultimately postponed the meeting in order to conduct a study on the church's viability. First Church pointed out that McCullough's decision to postpone the vote after already setting a date for it violated the disaffiliation agreement that the conference leaders themselves had set up for the churches. Pushing back, conference leaders said they had a right to postpone First Church's disaffiliation vote.



Some of church apportionments go to superintendents' salaries

Testimony by conference leaders included information about what is paid through church apportionments. Church of the Servant attorneys and First Church attorneys made a point to note that the apportionments that churches pay into the conference fund the salaries of district superintendents, who play a key role in the disaffiliation process. As such, they said, the churches should expect fair and unbiased treatment from district superintendents in the disaffiliation process.

Sunday school group left church over 'ethos' statement

Jane Johnson, a Church of the Servant member, said she, her husband Bob and their entire Genesis Sunday school group at First United Methodist

Church of Edmond left that church when Powers was senior pastor there. Jones said Powers told the congregation he would not lead them through a discernment/disaffiliation process because it was not part of the "ethos" of the church. She said her Sunday school group began attending Church of the Servant and had hoped to vote on disaffiliation at their new church home, including a second vote in 2023.

Church is losing money and people over split, member says

Church of the Servant member Jim Flurry said the ongoing disaffiliation dispute with the conference and the conference's denial of a second congregational vote on disaffiliation had caused members to leave the church. He also said he knew that some people were withholding their monetary pledges from the church until a decision on disaffiliation was determined by the house of worship. On cross-examination by the conference's attorney, Flurry admitted that people might leave the church no matter what was decided in terms of disaffiliation. He said he still thought more people would leave if the church were not given an opportunity to have another disaffiliation vote and that fewer people would leave if the church chose to disaffiliate.

"The harm would be the church would split, fracture," Flurry said. "We just need to have the vote in order for the dust to settle and we decide which way we're going to go."

Conference was entitled to change disaffiliation requirements, leaders say

Conference leaders said they had the right to change the disaffiliation agreement required of churches. They based this on a ruling from the United Methodist Church's Judicial Council, which said regional conferences are entitled to establish reasonable requirements that are not inconsistent with Paragraph 2553. Conference leaders said they began with a template provided

by the denomination's General Council as they crafted the exit agreement for Oklahoma churches. Attorneys for First Church described the conference's disaffiliation agreement as an "elusive" document because conference leaders changed it several times.



Church of the Servant had same rights as superintendent

The Church of the Servant church council asked Powers to call a disaffiliation vote in 2023 but he ultimately refused after meeting with the congregation in July. Timmons ruled that the church council had as much right to call the vote as Powers, the district superintendent.