

LIFESTYLE

Church of the Servant's plan for Sept. 5 disaffiliation vote is quashed with court's stay

Latest development part of the twists and turns in disaffiliation dispute



Carla Hinton

The Oklahoman

[View Comments](#)



A local church had hoped to decide its future with the United Methodist Church but an appellate court has temporarily put those plans on hold.

The Oklahoma Supreme Court issued a stay on Monday, pending the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's appeal of a lower court's ruling in favor of Church of the Servant, 14343 N MacArthur.

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

The state supreme court's stay means that Church of the Servant can not act on Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia Timmons' recent ruling that the church be given an opportunity to have another vote to consider ending its affiliation with United Methodist Church.

The Church of the Servant church council had already announced plans to hold a congregational disaffiliation vote on Sept. 5. Monday evening, the Rev. Sam Powers sent the church an email letting church council members know that he had cancelled the Sept. 5 vote due to the stay. Powers is Church of the Servant's district superintendent, appointed by Oklahoma Bishop Jimmy Nunn.

The Oklahoma United Methodist Conference is ultimately hoping the Oklahoma Supreme Court will overturn Timmons' ruling, arguing that the civil court has no jurisdiction to decide church matters, including disaffiliation. A spokesman for the conference said an appeal on the ruling has not been filed yet but it will be soon.

"The Oklahoma Annual Conference is grateful that the Supreme Court of Oklahoma granted an emergency stay today, stopping the district court-ordered interference in our disaffiliation process," conference leaders said in a statement on Monday.

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

"We believe the lower court's decision on Aug. 21 took away the rights of the Church of the Servant members who have twice voted to remain a part of the

United Methodist Church, representing an unconstitutional intrusion into religious self-governance in violation of the First Amendment."

Monday, Cara Nicklas, an attorney for Church of the Servant, said the church council had received Powers' letter and council members would continue to hold informational meetings on disaffiliation while the matter is being settled in court.

The disaffiliation dispute with the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference spilled over into the civil court after conference leaders denied the congregation a disaffiliation vote earlier in 2023. Church of the Servant had voted on disaffiliation on Sept. 11, 2022, but failed to meet the two-thirds majority required to disaffiliation. In their lawsuit filed in July, the Church of the Servant church council accused conference leaders of trying to prevent the congregation from exiting the denomination in order to seize the church property and other assets.

Critical timing

Church of the Servant has been trying to meet two deadlines — one imposed by the regional conference and one by the international United Methodist Church's General Conference.

In 2019, the denomination's General Conference add a special provision to the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline allowing a "gracious exit" to churches in disagreement over same-sex marriage and gay ordination. As part of this special provision known as Paragraph 2553, 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: Church of the Servant vote[Church of the Servant to get second vote](#)

The Oklahoma United Methodist Conference, the regional United Methodist affiliate, has 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 at a special — final — conference meeting set for Oct. 13-14.

The date was key because conference leaders informed Church of the Servant that they must wait 12 months before holding another congregational vote because their 2022 vote fell shy of the required two-thirds 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. Monica Wittrock, a member of Church of the Servant's church council, said Powers promised church members that they would have an opportunity for another disaffiliation vote in 2023.

Church of the Servant's attorneys said the Sept. 6 deadline seemed arbitrary and Timmons agreed in her ruling. Conference leaders said that the deadlines for churches to have their disaffiliation votes conducted were not arbitrary but determined to give conference staff time to review the documents and to prepare for the special disaffiliation gatherings.