

What we know about Oklahoma United Methodist disaffiliation court cases



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There are currently two Oklahoma United Methodist houses of worship that have taken disaffiliation disputes to the civil courts.

The congregations of First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City, 131 NW 4, and United Methodist Church of the Servant, 14343 N MacArthur, have each filed lawsuits against the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference. They have turned to Oklahoma County District Court to seek redress in their quest to end their affiliation with the United Methodist Church.

Disputes are part of a bigger United Methodist Church schism

Both disaffiliation disputes are 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. 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 ban on same-sex marriage and gay ordination, they think the denomination is headed in a more liberal direction. First Church is considered one of these traditionalist or conservative churches. Church of the Servant's congregation includes a group that is considered traditionalist and that group is behind the church's court case.

ADVERTISING

Special provision provides catalyst for exits

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.

More:[What we know: Oklahoma churches seeking to cut ties with United Methodist denomination](#)

A look at First Church and Church of the Servant in court

Here are key takeaways from the First Church and Church of the Servant cases and where they are in the court system.

First Church

June 1

- First Church trustees file a lawsuit on June 1 claiming conference leaders kept the church from disaffiliating in April. Trustees said if the church had been allowed to disaffiliate at that time, the exiting congregation would have been allowed to cut ties with the denomination and still retain \$30 million in property and assets, including the First Church building at NW 4 and Robinson in downtown Oklahoma City. The church, which started a few days after the 1889 Land Run, is considered a historic downtown Oklahoma City house of worship.

July 17

- After a hearing held over a period of three days, Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia Timmons rules in First Church's favor, saying her ruling is based on neutral principles of law applicable to a property dispute, "without deciding any religious questions and without intruding upon legitimate ecclesiastical autonomy." In her ruling, she agrees with church trustees' assertion that the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference intentionally prevented the church congregation from taking a congregational disaffiliation vote in January 2023, which kept them from disaffiliating in April along with 55 other Oklahoma churches. She also agrees with First Church that conference leaders seemed bent on preventing the congregation from exiting by singling the church out by requiring a study to determine the church's financial and ministerial viability.
- In a key component of the judge's ruling, she orders Oklahoma United Methodist Bishop Jimmy Nunn to call a special disaffiliation meeting so that delegates of the 365 remaining Oklahoma United Methodist churches AND delegates from the 55 churches that disaffiliated in April could consider First Church's disaffiliation request. This required redo

of the April disaffiliation meeting is Timmons' effort to place First Church in circumstances similar to what it would have faced if the church had its disaffiliation request considered with the other 55 churches whose exit requests were considered and ratified (formally approved) at the April gathering.

July 27

- Oklahoma United Methodist Conference appeals Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia Timmons' ruling in favor of First Church, claiming the "ruling blatantly interferes with an internal church process protected under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution."

July 31

- The Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's request for Judge Timmons to stay her First Church ruling is denied by Timmons. The conference asked Timmons to put her order on hold, pending the outcome of the conference's appeal.

Aug. 2

- The Oklahoma Supreme Court grants the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's request for an emergency stay of Judge Timmons' ruling, pending the outcome of their appeal. Conference leaders cancel a special Aug. 5 disaffiliation meeting that Timmons ordered them to hold in order to consider First Church's disaffiliation request.

Aug. 22

- Oral arguments in the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's appeal of Timmons' ruling in favor of First Church will begin on Aug. 22.



Church of the Servant

Sept. 11, 2022

- Church of the Servant, 14343 N MacArthur, holds a congregational vote on disaffiliation on Sept. 11, 2022, which is a key step in the disaffiliation process. The church falls shy of the required two-thirds majority vote by only two votes.

June 18

- The Rev. Matthew Mitchell served as Church of the Servant's senior pastor and led the congregation through the first disaffiliation vote in September 2022. Mitchell came from Georgia to lead the church in 2017. Earlier this year, he submitted his resignation and he preached his final sermon at the church on June 18.

July 3

- Trustees of Church of the Servant, founded by the Rev. Norman Neaves in 1968, file a lawsuit on July 3, claiming that the Oklahoma United Methodist Church had been playing "cat and mouse games" to keep the congregation from moving forward with the process to end their church's denominational affiliation. The trustees ask the courts to order conference leaders to allow the church to hold another congregational disaffiliation vote, which is a step that would possibly move their disaffiliation request forward for consideration at an October meeting of United Methodist delegates. The church held a congregational disaffiliation vote in 2022 but did not have the required two-thirds majority vote in favor of disaffiliation. In its petition, the congregation said the conference's decision regarding disaffiliation meeting dates were "unilaterally and arbitrarily set" ahead of the Dec. 31, 2023 deadline for the Book of Discipline Paragraph 2553.
- Another deadline is key to the impasse between the Church of the Servant congregation and the conference. Conference leaders have given congregations until Sept. 6 to hold the required discernment meetings and congregational disaffiliation votes in order to have their exit requests ratified by United Methodist delegates in a third and final disaffiliation gathering set for October. Under the conference's guidelines, a church 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.

Aug. 18

- Timmons will consider Church of the Servant's request for an injunction on Aug. 18. The church is asking the court to order conference leaders to allow another congregational disaffiliation vote.