

LIFESTYLE

# Oklahoma Supreme Court rules against two churches in United Methodist exit cases



[Carla Hinton](#)

The Oklahoman

[View Comments](#)



The [fate of two Oklahoma City churches](#) was decided Thursday by the Oklahoma Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference.

The attorney for the conference and co-counsel for First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City and Church of the Servant gave oral arguments

before the state's highest court on Thursday, asking justices to decide if an Oklahoma County District Court judge's rulings in the congregations' disaffiliation cases should stand.

But the state Supreme Court decided the District Court judge lacked jurisdiction over the matter.

The two houses of worship — First Church at 131 NW 4 and Church of the Servant at 14343 N MacArthur — filed separate lawsuits against the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference in Oklahoma County District Court over the summer, but the state Supreme Court decided to roll them into one case because they each dealt with the congregations' rights to decide on ending their affiliation with the United Methodist Church.

The combined cases were being watched closely by Oklahoma United Methodists and those who recently ended their affiliation with the denomination. Thursday, the Oklahoma Supreme Court courtroom at the Capitol was packed with so many people that an overflow area was set up outside the courtroom so a group of people could watch the proceedings on a large TV screen.

**More:** In United Methodist disaffiliation, exiting liberal churches a surprising minority

The church autonomy doctrine, which protects the right of religious institutions to govern themselves, came up more than once Thursday as the opposing attorneys argued on behalf of their clients.

District Court Judge Aletia Timmons had ruled in both churches' favor against the conference, a regional affiliate of the United Methodist denomination. At the time, she said she felt she could weigh in on the disaffiliation matters by basing her rulings on neutral principles of contract law. The churches' co-council, Cheryl Plaxico and Cara Nicklas, presented each case as a property dispute, claiming that the conference leaders were singling out the two

churches to prevent them from leaving the United Methodist Church so the conference could keep their valuable church property.

On Thursday, Plaxico reiterated that the civil courts may weigh in on the disaffiliation cases because each case was essentially a property dispute. She said both churches were initially trying to vote on exiting the United Methodist Church, with an eye on possibly leaving the denomination and taking their church buildings and other assets with them while a special provision called Paragraph 2553 in the denomination's Book of Discipline remains in effect until Dec. 31.

**More: Church of the Servant case** Judge says Church of the Servant's exit attempt was in 'chokehold,' orders second vote

Attorney Ross Plourde, argued on the conference's behalf that Timmons in Oklahoma County District Court, and any civil court, had no jurisdiction over the cases because they involved the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline and were therefore ecclesiastical in nature.

He said First Church and Church of the Servant could have taken the matter to the United Methodist Church's Judicial Council, but the congregations instead chose to take the dispute to civil court, which cannot rule on ecclesiastical matters because to do so would violate the regional conference's First Amendment rights.



"The idea that the government can come in and tell the church what to do, I think that's just wrong," Plourde said.

Plaxico countered by saying the two congregations' First Amendment rights must be taken into account, as well.

"The petitions should not be allowed to extort and manipulate based on the First Amendment and violate these congregations' own First Amendment rights," she said.

## **Special provision is key**

The arguments heard before the state Supreme Court were the latest developments in a widening schism in the international United Methodist Church — one of Oklahoma's largest faith groups. Disagreement about the scriptural compatibility of same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay

clergy is at the heart of the divide and 84 Oklahoma churches have ended their affiliation with the denomination since 2022.

**More: First Church files suit**Judge says Church of the Servant's exit attempt was in 'chokehold,' orders second vote

The catalyst for the trend of leaving appears to be the end-of-the-year deadline for Paragraph 2553, the special provision at the heart of the First Church and Church of the Servant cases against the regional conference.