

The most consequential year in UMC split leaves uncertainty, new horizons. Here's how



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- As part of splintering in United Methodist Church, church disaffiliations increased by 174% in 2023 compared to 2019-2022 ahead of policy expiration date.
- Sheer scale of church disaffiliations shifted earlier plans aimed at resolving the crisis through proposed legislation at UMC General Conference, which is set for April 2024.

- Both the UMC and others who left the denomination look toward new horizons and implementing innovative practices.

Bishop Robin Dease braced for chaos when she started her new role within the United Methodist Church this year overseeing the North Georgia Conference.

Just days before her first day in January, Dease's predecessor, Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson, and other conference leadership decided to block churches in the conference from leaving the UMC as part of a splintering throughout the largely Nashville-based denomination. The decision incited legal battles that would consume Dease's first few months in office.

"It was a learning curve," Dease said in an interview. "It was drinking from a fire hose."

Following a judge's ruling against the North Georgia Conference, Dease and her team pivoted to accommodate churches trying to leave the UMC through a process known as disaffiliation. Through it all, Dease found it especially painstaking that "many of these churches who left didn't get to know who I am, and I didn't get to know them."

For Dease, whose election to bishop in September 2022 was unusual and her appointment historic — she's the first Black bishop to lead the North Georgia Conference — change has been the only constant. The same is true for the entire UMC, the nation's largest mainline Protestant denomination as it deals with fallout of disputes over church policy and theology, including dealing with LGBTQ rights. Many churches are leaving to join a more conservative, breakaway denomination called the Global Methodist Church.

This year alone, 5,505 churches disaffiliated from the UMC, a 174% increase to total disaffiliations in the previous four years combined. Regional conferences fought at least 17 legal battles this year, often to settle procedural disputes but which amplified animosity between UMC leaders and dissenting churches. It was the most intense year so far in the UMC's ongoing divorce.

The sheer scale of disaffiliations in 2023 shifted earlier plans aimed at resolving the crisis at the UMC General Conference, or the denomination's international legislative body that meets every four years, which is set for April 2024. As a result, both the UMC and those who left the denomination can start to look toward new horizons.



“We can move on,” the Rev. Carolyn Moore, whose Georgia congregation was among 263 churches in Dease’s conference that disaffiliated this year, said in an interview. “The big questions are answered, and we can dream again.”

Moore and Dease are on different sides of the debate, but both expressed a similar sense of relief.

“I don’t think Christians are primarily built for contention,” Moore said. “I hope that everybody, whatever side they’re on, is experiencing relief that this part is over and we can all get back to ministry.”

Inside the UMC, trying to get out

The court battles Dease's conference fought this year emerged out of congregations' sense of urgency to leave the UMC by the end of 2023.

"It's something I wasn't prepared for, nor did I really know how to navigate," Dease said about the court cases.

The policy allowing churches to disaffiliate, outlined by UMC Book of Discipline paragraph 2553, will expire after Dec. 31. A 2019 special session of the UMC General Conference approved Paragraph 2553 as a temporary fix in advance of a more permanent solution, a proposal for the regular UMC General Conference in 2020 called the Protocol of Reconciliation through Grace and Separation (AKA "the Protocol").

But support for the Protocol waned amid repeated delays to the UMC General Conference. In turn, disaffiliation became the primary means through which a church leaves the denomination. It's likely the Protocol will still come up at the UMC General Conference in April, but its chance of success is slim.

Meanwhile, at least seven regional conferences decided to use different polices than Paragraph 2553 to allow churches to leave. Some of those conferences have already enacted those polices — allowing 113 churches in South Carolina and 24 churches in West Virginia to exit the UMC this year — or will do so after Paragraph 2553 expires.

For the conferences that used Paragraph 2553, some removed barriers to make it easier for churches to disaffiliate, whereas others required additional financial and procedural prerequisites. The North Georgia Conference's pause on disaffiliations was arguably the most drastic measure, evidenced by the fact it didn't hold up in court.

When a judge ordered the North Georgia Conference to lift its pause, Dease decided not to appeal the ruling.

"I'm not a fighter in that way," Dease said. "I'm more of a person who will collaborate and bring people together."

Analyzing a UMC disaffiliation trend:Why the debate on whether to leave can be more intense among suburban UMC churches

Outside the UMC

Though her church was among the group which grappled with the North Georgia Conference, Moore is thinking excitedly about the future instead of harboring resentment about the past.

Moore, also a prominent figure in the larger movement for a more conservative Methodist alternative, and her congregation will be fully affiliated with the Global Methodist Church on Jan. 1.

“The (Global Methodist) movement is about so much more than being a landing place for people who were disaffiliating from the UMC,” Moore said. “The movement really is about a revitalization of historic Methodism.”

Since its May 2022 launch, the Global Methodist Church will have admitted by the new year 4,605 total churches, established 23 regional conferences, and formally partnered with eight theological schools to train its future clergy, according to Global Methodist Church chief executive Rev. Keith Boyette.



One major setback for the new denomination has been UMC policy restrictions for churches outside the U.S. The upcoming UMC General Conference is expected to feature deliberations on proposals that will determine the degree to which the UMC splinters overseas.

There are also churches that disaffiliated from the UMC that don't intend to join the Global Methodist Church. Some will remain independent, though others might be drawn to new alternatives, such as the Methodist Collegiate Church.

Started by White's Chapel, a large congregation outside Dallas, Methodist Collegiate Church is an association of churches in voluntary cooperation over shared "center-right" views and that are committed to Wesleyan values. explained Methodist Collegiate Church leaders Revs. John McKellar and Larry Duggins. Compared to the UMC and Global Methodist Church, the model is a is a theological balance and a structural anomaly.

“We want this to be a people who want to be here, and we really don’t want to get into the political wrangling and fighting that’s happened,” McKellar said in an interview.

Methodist Collegiate Church officially started its work in July after White’s Chapel disaffiliated from the UMC. Likewise, churches in [Texas](#) and [Oklahoma](#) that left the UMC have established or pitched other alternative Methodist groups.

Methodist Collegiate Church and other “third way” groups will have broader appeal as the dust of disaffiliation settles. Congregations that exited the UMC but didn’t join the Global Methodist Church might realize upon further reflection the need to still partner with other churches to provide connection and accountability, Duggins said.

“There are a number of congregations who go through the trauma of disaffiliation and then say, ‘I don’t want to do anything for a year or two to allow us to make a deeply informed and prayer-surrounded choice about whether we belong to another denomination,’” Duggins said.

More on status of churches outside U.S.: [Splinter explainer: Will UMC churches outside the U.S. stay or go from the denomination?](#)

Still in the UMC or out, thinking out of the box

Diverging from a more rigid hierarchy in the UMC and other Methodist groups, the Methodist Collegiate is entering uncharted waters.

“To think out of the box is a little unsettling,” McKellar said. “That’s why I think it’s for the people who are willing to try something new and work the bugs out.”

But therein is also a selling point to churches that have felt concerned about UMC bureaucracy and bishops’ authority. Though churches’ stated reason for seeking disaffiliation had to be about their position human sexuality,

disagreements over church authority fueled many churches' eagerness to leave.

Dease, a more progressive voice within the UMC, acknowledges some of those concerns and anticipates the North Georgia Conference operating in a more decentralized way going forward. Dease plans to be an itinerant bishop who frequently travels throughout her conference's seven districts, working to empower more lay leaders to take initiative at the local level.

Partly financially-driven — revenue shortfalls in the UMC are forcing regional conferences to downsize staff — Dease also sees reorganization as opportunistic. “It’s a good time to make drastic change, fail fast, pivot and start again,” the bishop said.

For the North Georgia Conference, that change includes greater investment in church growth in marginalized areas and communities of color. The strategy might see a lower return on investment initially, but Dease said it’s necessary for other reasons.

“That’s going to be our focus: how do we start bringing people together when society keeps dividing us,” Dease said.

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