

# United Methodists Down 7,659 Churches As Exit Window Ends

1 in 4 UMC congregations have now disaffiliated in the largest US denominational schism since the Civil War. Will African Methodists leave next?

**KATE SHELLNUTT AND DANIEL SILLIMAN**

**DECEMBER 18, 2023 01:00 PM**



Image: bjones27 / Getty Images

The rupture of the United Methodist Church (UMC) is nearly complete. As the window closes on a temporary plan allowing disaffiliations, nearly 1 out of 4 of the denomination's 30,000 congregations decided to split over issues of sexuality and authority.

This month marked the final push to exit before the December 31 deadline. In that time, another [74](#) churches in Florida voted to leave, plus 51 more in Illinois, [152](#) in Mississippi, 8 in New Mexico, and 36 across three regions in Texas. When regional conferences ratified the last batch of disaffiliations, the tally came to 5,642 congregations departing in 2023 and a total of 7,659 over the past four years, according to [United Methodist News](#).

The thousands of disaffiliations represent the conclusion of decades of UMC debates, proposals, and gatherings focused on sexuality.

This is also the largest denominational divide in the United States since the Civil War. While there have been several notable church schisms in the 20th century—including those that gave

birth to the Presbyterian Church in America, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the North American Lutheran Church, and the Anglican Church in North America—none involve more than 600 or 700 separating congregations. The UMC split is more than 10 times as large.

The division likely paves the way for the UMC—which still does not affirm gay marriage on paper—to adopt more progressive policies at its General Conference in the spring of 2024. The gathering had been [postponed four years](#) due to the pandemic.

The split also resulted in a new Methodist denomination. The Global Methodist Church (GMC) [launched in May 2022](#) and has since [added](#) more than 4,000 congregations from all 50 states. GMC plans to hold its first annual meeting in September. The transitional leadership has promised the GMC will maintain traditional Christian views of sexuality and limit the power of bishops in the new denomination.

“Bishops will be term-limited to ensure that once a person is elected bishop, they no longer have a lifetime warranty on the office,” [wrote](#) Jay Therrell, a leader in the Wesleyan Covenant Association and an elder in a GMC congregation. “One of the mainstays of our current denominational drama is the extreme lack of accountability for bishops, clergy, and churches. Christians are called to live in accountable communities.”

Though United Methodists have not voted to drop [their traditional marriage stance](#)—they shot down proposals for change as recently as 2019—the denomination did not enforce the policy when bishops and churches continued ordaining non-celibate gay clergy and celebrating same-sex marriage. As the push for LGBT inclusion in the UMC persisted, conservatives [opted to leave](#).

In 2019, the UMC’s Special General Conference in St. Louis changed its book of discipline to give churches until December 31, 2023, to exit the denomination while keeping their property. The provision, called [Paragraph 2553](#), detailed a process for voting, coordinating with regional conferences, and paying apportionments and pension liabilities.

Some churches that voted to leave [met resistance along the way](#), having to fight their conferences in court to complete the process or being asked to pay more than they could afford to leave. In the South and Midwest, the UMC lost hundreds of churches this year. Nearly 500 exited the denomination in Tennessee, along with 750 in Texas, 672 in North Carolina, 623 in Georgia, 598 in Ohio, 452 in Pennsylvania, and 345 in Virginia. In some conferences, more than half of churches are no longer part of the UMC.

Smaller numbers split in New England and the West. There were only 2 disaffiliations each in Vermont and New Hampshire, 6 in Massachusetts, and 7 in Maine. There were 4 in Idaho, 8 in California, 9 in Nevada, and 14 in Washington.

## EXPAND GRAPH

A Wesley Theological Seminary study [found](#) notable differences between departing and remaining congregations. After the split, the UMC will be “smaller, less Southern, probably more diverse.”

The departing churches are more likely to be led by men and more likely to be majority white. Of the first 2,000 churches to exit, 84 percent were led by men, compared to 71 percent of UMC churches overall, the study found. And 98 percent of the exiting churches were majority white, compared to 90 percent across the denomination, according to the Wesleyan Theological Seminary.

The UMC had been “easily [the most geographically dispersed denomination](#),” with churches in 95 percent of US counties, according to researcher Ryan Burge.

In some ways, the UMC had a very big tent. Both former president George W. Bush and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton are members. GOP presidential candidate Nikki Haley [belonged](#) to South Carolina’s largest UMC congregation, which disaffiliated this year. A 2019 [survey of regular attenders](#) found that about 44 percent identified as traditionalists, 28 percent as centrists, and 20 percent as progressives.

And yet the denomination was also united on many big issues. Large majorities of all three groups believed Jesus was born of a virgin, died on a cross to reconcile humanity with God, resurrected from the dead in bodily form, and today calls people to “make disciples ... for the transformation of the world.”

Divisions over LGBT inclusion could not be resolved, however. A [plan](#) to allow differences between congregations failed in 2018.

“It comes down to a theological crisis, with conservatives increasingly alienated from the theological liberals who constantly pushed for LGBT inclusion,” Methodist Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, [wrote](#) earlier this year.

According to Tooley, the ultimate division of the UMC has [long](#) been [clear](#). What that division will mean for America, however, remains to be seen.

“As old United Methodism fractures, it is an open question whether Methodism can again be a major force in America,” Tooley [wrote](#) in *World* magazine. “Global Methodism and other Wesleyan networks might remain small and insular, left behind by the continued growth of nondenominational Christianity. ... United Methodism’s demise might unleash a revived Methodism as a restored evangelistic movement in America.”

## EXPAND GRAPH

In addition, the vast majority of UMC congregations have felt the effects of the split in their own pews. In addition to churches exiting the denomination, thousands of churchgoers who disagreed with their congregation's vote to stay or go switched memberships this year as a result.

Erik Hoeke, a United Methodist pastor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, described it as "reshuffling the deck." Tensions, however, persist.

"I don't think the conflict will go away entirely," Hoeke [said](#), "but I do think that as people sort themselves into spaces where they feel comfortable living out their theological commitments, whatever they are, I think some of the anxiety will fade, it will dissipate. It's just one of those things that we have to be patient about."

While the split in the US reaches a conclusion this year, disaffiliations are still being worked out internationally. The UMC has twice as many members abroad as it does in the US. Scott Field, president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, told [the Associated Press](#) he predicted an upcoming "African wave," with conservative bishops [deciding](#) to leave.

At its General Conference in the coming spring, the denomination is [proposing](#) a new structure for organizing across continents to allow for "regionalization" and contextualization of the church.

"We reject the proposed regionalization plan, aimed at silencing the voice of the church in Africa," [wrote](#) Jerry P. Kulah, a United Methodist leader in Liberia and general coordinator of the UMC Africa Initiative. "The effect of that plan would be to compartmentalize sin within the UMC and make the African church complicit in allowing the US church to adopt unscriptural teachings and standards."

Kulah and dozens of African UMC leaders met in September to pray and strategize for the upcoming General Conference. The group of 40 stated that they continue to reject "the progressive views of the largely white, relatively rich, and declining church in the US" and plan to call for an opportunity to disaffiliate as American churches were able to under Paragraph 2553.

A dozen UMC bishops in Africa, on the other hand, [reiterated](#) their intent to "not forsake the fellowship" despite their theological disagreements around sexuality and marriage. Back in the US, both those who have departed and those who have remained are talking about ways to move forward without acrimony.

When the North Georgia Conference [approved](#) the disaffiliations of 262 churches last month, losing a third of its conference, Bishop Robin Dease likened it to the diverging paths of Peter and Paul and Paul and Barnabas. "As we scatter to spread the good news, in different places, heal the scars of our division," she [prayed](#).

The transitional leadership of the GMC, meanwhile, [talked](#) about the need to be cautious and humble. Cara Nicklas, chair of the transitional leadership council, said the new denomination

should be “deliberate and methodical” and “leave space for those we know will be joining us in the not-too-distant future.”

Keith Boyette, the church’s connectional officer, acknowledged that the division has not always been neat and tidy. But it’s time, he said, to move forward.

“To be sure, it can be messy sometimes because we are frail and fallible, but thanks be to God,” he said, “we are redeemed and called forth to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ!”

