

LIFESTYLE

Disappointed, but not disheartened: OKC churches in disaffiliation dispute talk Supreme Court ruling

Leaders of two local churches have their say regarding recent unfavorable OK Supreme Court ruling



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The Oklahoman

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Congregational leaders of two local churches recently shared their thoughts in the wake of an Oklahoma Supreme Court ruling that appears to have blocked their efforts to potentially exit the United Methodist Church.

The court cases of First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City and Church of the Servant were rolled into one as the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference asked the state's highest court to determine whether an Oklahoma County District Court judge had jurisdiction to rule on their respective cases.

The regional conference, led by Oklahoma United Methodist Bishop Jimmy Nunn, maintained that Oklahoma County District Court Judge Aletia

Timmons violated the conference's First Amendment rights by weighing in on the ecclesiastical matters of the regional affiliate of United Methodist Church.

The Oklahoma Supreme Court sided with the regional conference in its Oct. 5 ruling, saying that Timmons lacked subject matter jurisdiction.

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For the two United Methodist churches, case was a property dispute rather than a religious one

Trustees of First Church, a historic downtown Oklahoma City church at 131 NW 4, argued that the issue at hand was about property rather than ecclesiastical matters and Timmons agreed with them when she ruled in their favor. The judge said she based her ruling in First Church's favor on neutral principles of contract law because it appeared to be a property dispute.

First Church had accused regional conference leaders of singling out their church in an effort to prevent the congregation from disaffiliating and taking their church property and assets with them as they are allowed to do under a special provision in the United Methodist Book of Discipline. The special provision known as Paragraph 2553 has a sunset date of Dec. 31, 2023.

In a recent statement, Hardy Patton, a First Church trustee, said the Supreme Court justices' ruling appeared to indicate their belief that civil courts have no subject matter jurisdiction to rule on church matters.

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"This ruling unfortunately prevents First Church from moving forward through the normal (disaffiliation) ratification process," Patton said. "While First Church is disappointed in the ruling of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, we

await the more detailed ruling from the justices that should follow in the near future and may provide more insight into the decision. First Church continues to hold the position that this issue is simply a property dispute."

What's next for Church of the Servant?

Meanwhile, Church of the Servant's case was similar, but there was a difference.

While First Church trustees learned that a majority of the congregation favored disaffiliation via an unofficial vote in February, Church of the Servant trustees filed suit against the regional conference to get a chance to have an official exit vote in fall 2023. The trustees accused the regional conference leaders of preventing the congregation from having a vote as they were promised, to help determine whether the majority of the congregation wanted to pursue disaffiliation.

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Notably, the church held a disaffiliation vote in September 2022, which failed by just two votes to meet the two-thirds majority needed for disaffiliation. Timmons, ruling in favor of the church, said the case was a property dispute and that the congregation should get another exit vote, particularly because the church's trustees had agreed that one was needed.



Monica Whitrock, a Church of the Servant trustee, commented on the recent Supreme Court ruling.

“We were disappointed by the ruling of the Oklahoma Supreme Court that supported the Annual Conference’s denial of our church’s request to hold a church vote as promised, which would have allowed our church to decide the future of our congregation and property that was purchased and supported by our members for more than 50 years,” Whitrock said in a statement.

Attorneys for Church of the Servant, 14343 N MacArthur, had argued that the church's lawsuit also was essentially a property dispute because the regional conference wanted to prevent the congregation from taking the church's property and assets upon disaffiliation.

Whitrock said the congregation would continue its gospel mission, despite the Supreme Court ruling.

"We respect the Justices' decision and appreciate their efforts in this matter," she said. "Nonetheless, the members of Church of the Servant are not disheartened in our core mission to support our community and remain dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel wherever we go."