

RELIGION

The United Methodist Church in Oklahoma is looking to positives after rift and exits

Church exits have transformed Oklahoma's faith landscape



[Carla Hinton](#)

The Oklahoman

[View Comments](#)



The United Methodist Church in Oklahoma has experienced turbulence in the last few years, with more than 100 churches leaving, disputes ending up in civil courts and the exposure of rifts that continue to divide congregations.

Now that a season of exits is over, what does the United Methodist Church in Oklahoma look like?

For starters, the denomination has lost its position as the state's second-largest faith group in terms of churches, behind Oklahoma Southern Baptists, who have 1,767 churches.

With the loss of 127 churches through disaffiliation, the combined Oklahoma United Methodist Conference and Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference include 401 United Methodist churches, while the Assemblies of God denomination has 457 churches in the state, according to Oklahoma United Methodist leaders and the Oklahoma District Council of the Assemblies of God.

Disaffiliations also have resulted in a diminished United Methodist presence in certain areas of Oklahoma like Tulsa, where several large churches in that northeastern Oklahoma city and surrounding suburbs have ended their affiliation with the denomination.

Despite this, Oklahoma United Methodist leaders say there is hope in the path forward — and not only hope but new opportunities for growth. They said new churches like the Ceili Community in southwest Oklahoma City have been started in recent months, and there are plans to plant more. There are also hundreds of congregations and ministers that chose to remain a part of the "big tent" that is the United Methodist Church.

"We lost 127 churches and that's a significant number, but the exciting part about that is that you want to have leaders and churches that want to be here," said the Rev. Bessie Hamilton, an Oklahoma United Methodist Conference leader.

UMC disaffiliation in Oklahoma: What we know about Oklahoma United Methodist disaffiliation court cases

As the regional conference's associate director of connectional ministry for new faith communities and multi-ethnic initiatives, Hamilton works on planting new congregations, mentoring new church planters and enhancing ties with various ethnic groups.



Hamilton wants to see 127 new churches started to replace those lost through disaffiliation. The minister said this is a goal that may be ambitious, but she thinks it can be done through Dream A Church, a regional conference initiative that she created.

"It's almost like when a baby is born — it's something new," she said.

"I'm excited about the possibilities."

United Methodist exodus takes toll

As of Nov. 20, nearly 7,300 churches in the U.S., almost 24% of U.S. congregations, have been given approval to leave the United Methodist Church since 2019, according to an unofficial tally of congregations conducted by United Methodist News, the denomination's official news outlet.

The church exits are part of a schism in the international denomination over various issues, notably disagreements over the scriptural compatibility of same-sex marriage and ordination of gay clergy. A season of disaffiliations began in 2019 when the denomination's General Conference adopted a special provision allowing congregations who met certain conditions to leave the faith group with property until the provision expires on Dec. 31, 2023.

In Oklahoma, disaffiliations seem to have taken the greatest toll on Tulsa and its surrounding suburbs. Leaders with Asbury, one of the largest United Methodist churches in the state before its 2022 departure, kicked off the exit trend with an announcement about separation plans. Other Tulsa churches that followed suit included First United Methodist Church-Tulsa and St. James-Tulsa. Churches in suburban areas, including Jenks, Owasso, Claremore, Broken Arrow, Sapulpa and Sand Springs, also departed.

The Rev. Derrek Belase, the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's executive director of connectional ministries, said he wasn't surprised by the Tulsa-area exodus, but he was saddened by it. He pointed out that Tulsa wasn't the only area of the state where several congregations exited.

The Oklahoma Panhandle, Belase said, has only one remaining United Methodist church now that the disaffiliations in the state are over.



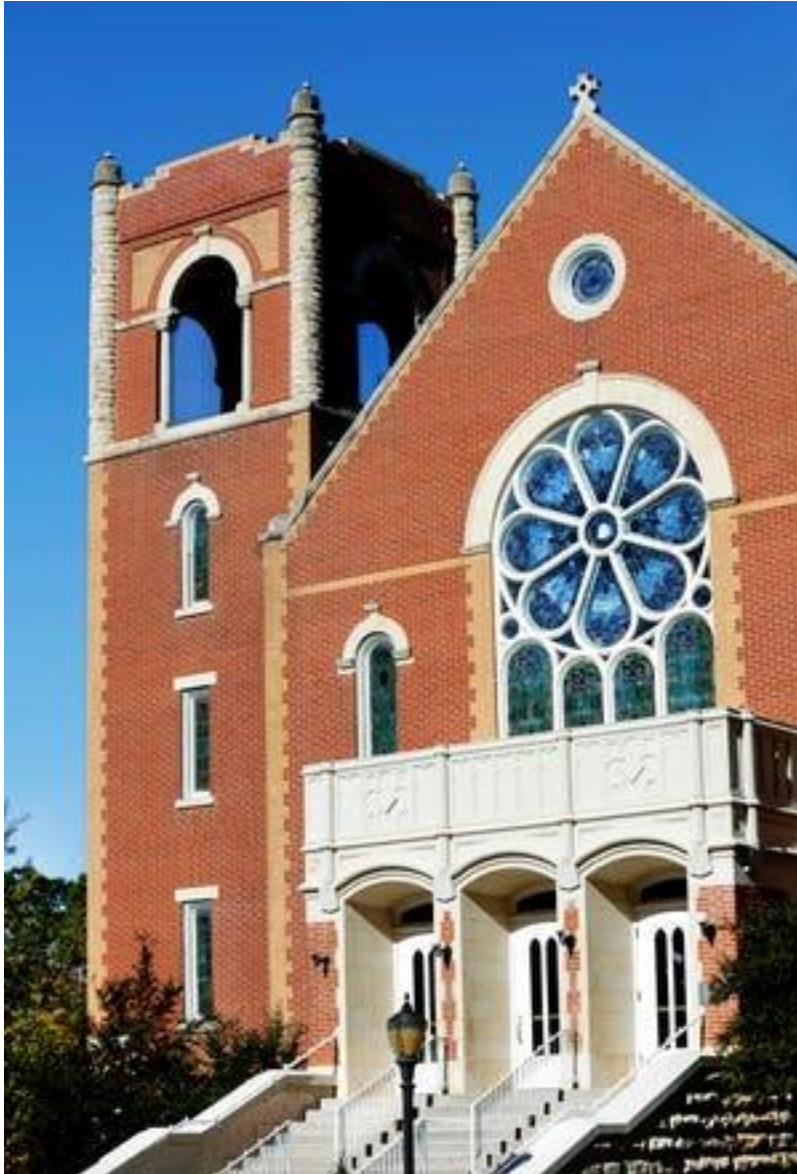
Dollars and downtown

Disaffiliations spilled over into civil courts, including a dispute over a historic downtown Oklahoma City church. St. Luke's, long considered a downtown house of worship, left the denomination. St. Luke's departure was significant because it was the largest United Methodist church in the state, with multiple campuses, and also because its departure left First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City as the denomination's only presence in the downtown area.

First Church trustees file a lawsuit on June 1 claiming regional conference leaders were keeping the congregation to disaffiliate and still retain about \$30 million in church property and assets. An Oklahoma County District Court judge ruled in First Church's favor, but the regional conference prevailed when it took the matter to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. The state's high court said the civil courts had no jurisdiction over church matters.

First Church trustees did not respond to queries about the status of the congregation, but a pastor appointed to lead the church continues in that post, and worship services and other ministry activities are ongoing.

Belase said he wasn't in a position to speak about the downtown church, but he did say that the conference is working with First Church's pastor, the Rev. Josue Araujo, as he leads both First Church and the Christ Experience, "two vitally important faith communities to downtown Oklahoma City."



Still making budget adjustments

How will United Methodist leaders address any funding shortfalls or troubles that may occur due to the disaffiliations? Belase said there is much he and other regional conference leaders don't yet know about how the church exits will impact the conference. They made adjustments for 2024 at a special conference gathering.

"The main impact beyond 2025 will be how the apportionments from the General Church or the denomination are assessed to us," Belase said.

"Currently, that is 27% of our budget. These fund vital ministries across the world, but we have to balance that, as local churches do, with needs in our annual conference."

He said once the denomination's General Conference meets in May 2024, regional conference leaders will have a better sense of the next quadrennial budget.

Pointing to positives

Belase, like Hamilton, said there are plenty of congregations and preachers who decided to stick with the denomination.

"We are pleased with all of the churches that stayed," he said. "We intend to work to ensure that all of our churches are strong."

In stark contrast to the slew of Tulsa-area churches that headed for the exit, Tulsa's Boston Avenue United Methodist appears to be standing firm in its alignment with the denomination. Leaders at the downtown Tulsa church declined to comment, but the congregation's continued commitment to the United Methodist Church was evidenced by a recent project providing church members with opportunities to make encouraging cards for regional conference leaders as they conducted the final phase of disaffiliations.

Belase said this includes working with clergy coaching cohorts and other initiatives to strengthen churches and clergy. He said all of the regional conference's districts will gather for leadership training events in January 2024.

Belase said there were areas of the state where many churches did not disaffiliate. These areas included the regional conference's Crossroads District,

which encompasses much of north Oklahoma City, and the Wichitas District, which encompasses southwest Oklahoma.



The Rev. Mark Foster, senior pastor of Acts II United Methodist Church in Edmond, was among the ministers who knew early on that their congregations would not disaffiliate. He said his church is back to seeing 500 people for weekend attendance for the first time in a few years (post COVID pandemic) and the church continues to see young families coming in.

Acts II, which started meeting in two Edmond public schools from 1999 through 2006, currently holds worship and ministry activities in three buildings at 4848 W Covell.

"They're full and we're grateful – we've got more ministry than we can say grace over," Foster said, joking.

And he said his church isn't the only United Methodist house of worship doing well. He said he has been excited to see what has happened at some churches in this new season for Oklahoma United Methodists.

"It's really been gratifying for me to see some of my younger colleagues have the opportunity to serve some of the more largers churches that survived the disaffiliations and are doing well," Foster said.

As examples, he pointed to the Rev. Ben Pascoe, at New Haven United Methodist in Tulsa,; the Rev. Chris Dodson, at Chapel Hill United Methodist in northwest Oklahoma City; and the Rev. Jim Perkin, at Nichols Hills United Methodist. The Rev. Jimmy Nunn, Oklahoma United Methodist Conference bishop, and his Cabinet made good decisions regarding those churches.

More: Few exiting OK liberal churches:[In United Methodist disaffiliation, exiting liberal churches a surprising minority](#)

The Edmond pastor also said other congregations that have remained United Methodist, like New Hope United Methodist in northwest Oklahoma City, have been growing rapidly under strong pastors like the Rev. Rod Newman, New Hope's senior minister.

"The thing that I'm seeing is the churches that are doing well and their churches are growing are also people who have chosen not to divide or argue," he said.

Foster, 56, said it's important to note that he and many others United Methodist ministers have remained friends with their counterparts who decided to leave the denomination. He said he has a friend in Pawhuska who chose to leave and they remain friendly.

"There's no way that I wouldn't wish him anything but the best, and he wants us to do well, too," Foster said.



'Good space, good people'

Regional conference leaders Belase and Hamilton said there are several new church starts on the horizon. Hamilton said one will begin soon in Owasso with 40 to 50 people who wished to remain United Methodist when their now-former church disaffiliated.

Belase said a new church also is being started in Claremore called Claremore Grace United Methodist Church. He said regional conference leaders also are vetting other proposals for new churches.

One new church already has begun, and Belase said he is particularly excited about it. He said the Ceili Community, meeting at 4409 S County Line Road Suite A, helps fill a void left by disaffiliations in the southwest OKC and Mustang areas.

Several members of the new church said it is a good representation of the United Methodists' future in Oklahoma.

"This is a great place to be proud of, especially considering the turmoil in the United Methodist religion," said Alicia Holmes.



"There's such a bad taste in people's mouth. This seems to be the right answer at turning that corner."

The Rev. Levi Duggan said he started the Ceili Community in January after attending a regional conference academy for innovative ministry. While there, he was encouraged to plant the type of church that he had envisioned. His idea was to reach people who haven't connected to a church and those who might have had negative experiences at a house of worship.

"They often love Jesus, they just don't love church," Duggan said.

Ceili, he said, means a traditional Celtic gathering with food, song and dance. The minister said the Ceili Community follows this premise as "a place of gathering, a place of serving and a place where we can party."

Along those lines, the church has "Family Sunday" once a month where members are encouraged to compete to see who can tell the best/worst dad joke, a play or skit is performed and attendees share a meal together.

Why UMC preachers won't cut ties: Why we stay: Preachers explain why they won't cut United Methodist ties

Duggan, 39, said the church is specifically trying to reach families with children, and that children currently make up about 40% of the congregation. He described the church as "ability inclusive," with a special emphasis on welcoming families who have a special needs child or whose lives have intersected with members of the special needs community. Duggan said he and his wife, Marti, adopted a child with Down syndrome, and they wanted to offer a church where individuals with special needs were welcome to participate in worship services and not be set apart in another ministry space.

"Every church will have its own DNA," he said.

The church also is planning to offer an "open-choice" community pantry where families in need may shop for food items including fresh and frozen meat and dairy products. On a recent weekday, Duggan and his wife, along with the church's executive pastor, Nick Bailey, 31, worked to convert the church's fellowship hall into the pantry space, hoping to open the new ministry in 2024.



Holmes, 53, and another church member Amy Marcum, were also on hand.

Holmes said she has a son with Down syndrome and her mother had recently passed away when she was invited to the Ceili Community by a friend in a same-sex marriage who had adopted a child with Down syndrome.

"She said 'Come on, you'll love it,'" Holmes said.

The church quickly became her new "happy place."

Marcum, 55, said much the same.

She said she knew she wanted to be part of the church because of its welcoming atmosphere.

"I love the fact that I am welcome no matter who I am," Marcum said. "I am forgiven, I am seen as who I am and even for the weird person that I can be."

She said she has found a sense of peace and belonging at the new church.

"I'd been away from church for least 25 years," she said. "It's good space, good people."

[View Comments](#)