

RELIGION

How United Methodists across the US are responding to historic policy changes



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Key Points

Following splintering in United Methodist Church, denomination's top legislative assembly approved historic changes in early May toward LGBTQ+ inclusion and to restructure denomination.

In response to UMC General Conference decisions, local United Methodist conferences ordain and commission LGBTQ+ clergy, and show support through resolutions acknowledging past harm.

At least five local conferences in the U.S. created or are exploring allowances for churches to continue leaving UMC despite expiration and removal of provision allowing for disaffiliation.

In a matter of days, Ohio pastor Angie Cox and her wife went from contemplating moving to a more permissive region of the United Methodist Church to preparing for a long career in local ministry in Columbus.

Cox unsuccessfully tried six times in five years to take the first of two major steps to becoming an ordained United Methodist elder, a pursuit that at times caused Cox to consider transferring to another denomination or to another region where UMC officials are less strict about LGBTQ+ clergy. But Cox, lead pastor of Livingston UMC in Columbus, also knew she was a United Methodist “to my core” and that she was called to ministry in West Ohio.

Then, the UMC General Conference in early May lifted a 40-year-old ban on LGBTQ+ clergy at the international policymaking body’s gathering in Charlotte, North Carolina, positioning Cox to receive what she had been in arms reach of for so long.

“I never considered myself an institutional disrupter and I still don’t,” Cox said in an interview. “But when I see injustice, I’m stubborn about facing it. So, that’s shown me a different part of me that I didn’t realize I had.”

Four days after the ordination policy change took effect, Cox petitioned the local United Methodist authority’s board of ordained ministry to reconsider her application for commissioning. Twenty-four

days later on June 1 at the West Ohio Conference annual legislative assembly, Cox's peers cheered and clapped for her during a celebration of ministry service.

"They were acknowledging that moment what it meant for so many people, not just for me," Cox said.

Cox's experience, albeit a unique one due to her persistence, is shared by other LGBTQ+ people, who were commissioned, ordained or reinstated at local United Methodist conferences' recent legislative assemblies held across the nation in recent weeks. In a significant shift in messaging from prior years, at least 10 local conferences showed support for LGBTQ+ inclusion through resolutions, motions, or reports to delegates.

Progressives see these local actions as establishing a baseline for the long work ahead to promote a more inclusive United Methodism. Likewise, these local conference gatherings exhibited the ongoing cultural tension among the church body between the post-general conference goals of LGBTQ+ inclusion and to remain a "big tent" denomination.

Between July 10-13, the UMC faces its next test at a series of simultaneous meetings of jurisdictions — comprised of groupings of local U.S. conferences, also known as annual conferences — to decide on bishop appointments. Actions by these five jurisdictional legislative assemblies spanning the entire U.S. will primarily deal with the new challenges of a drastically reduced budget approved by the UMC General Conference.

"The message was received and now we're all figuring out what it means for our local churches," said Derrick Scott III, a Florida-based United Methodist lay leader and voting delegate. "It's easier to spend time on legislation than it is to do groundwork. Because with groundwork, you have to deal with details and with actual humans."

The long-delayed UMC General Conference followed a splintering over church policy and theology, including dealing with LGBTQ+ rights, that caused 7,500-plus U.S. churches to leave the denomination between 2019-2023 through a process known as disaffiliation. The general conference's many decisions amid this season of upheaval, though a feat of historic proportions, created new dilemmas and frustrations for United Methodism's ideologically diverse and globally dispersed fellowship of believers.

Scott, an organizer with several centrist and progressive advocacy groups in the UMC and who traveled to several annual conference meetings in May and June, said he observed a struggle among some local church leaders to promote a more inclusive vision for the church while also trying not to alienate conservatives who chose to stay in the denomination.

Meanwhile, the Côte d'Ivoire Conference decided in late May to leave the denomination due to the general conference changes. The decision by the largest United Methodist conference in Africa was a blow to optimism for regionalization — the general conference proposal to restructure the denomination and give more autonomy to local United Methodist bodies worldwide — and created a predicament for the UMC Council of Bishops and ultimately a decision by the episcopal leadership to help find a legislative path to honor the West African conference's wishes.

“The system still bends its ear toward the traditionalists,” Scott said. “I think the details will continue to haunt us and it will be part of our hard work.”

UMC General Conference summary: United Methodists just held a historic, worldwide gathering: 3 key takeaways

Too far for some, just the start for others

Traditionalists have an entirely different analysis and felt many actions by local conferences and their bishops laid bare a liberal bias that conservatives have long accused UMC administrative leaders of quietly or sometimes openly endorsing.

"I first attended an annual conference in 1985 at age 20 and quickly realized annual conference doesn't represent most local church people," Mark Tooley, president of The Institute on Religion & Democracy, a group that long advocated for traditionalist policies in the UMC, said in a statement. "Half the conference is clergy, who are more progressive and institutional."

In one positive development for traditionalists, at least five U.S. conferences approved or showed support for allowances for churches to continue leaving the UMC despite a policy allowing for disaffiliations expiring at the end of 2023 and then the UMC General Conference striking the provision altogether. Many of the churches that have left the UMC have joined a more conservative breakaway denomination call the Global Methodist Church.

But at far more conferences, there was more open tolerance for sexual and gender minorities and acknowledgement of the church's past harmful actions toward LGBTQ+ people. Traditionalists see it as swift rejection of their decades of work to uphold Methodist orthodoxy and that people were quick to express their disagreement with upon changes to the UMC Book of Discipline.

"Dissenting voices even if reflective of wider church are marginalized. And so the denomination continues even if its policies are failing," said Tooley, who still attends a United Methodist church but ultimately wants to be part of the Global Methodist Church.

Progressives see those acknowledgements of past harms as necessary and only a first step toward deeper healing and cultural change.

At least three conferences sought to confront that past harm by reinstating the ordination credentials of LGBTQ+ people who surrendered those credentials or lost them to disciplinary proceedings. One of the most publicized cases was that of Beth Stroud, a Philadelphia pastor who the church defrocked in 2004 for coming out as a lesbian.

Another person to be reinstated was Deen Thompson, an 86-year-old Nashvillian who surrendered his ordination credentials in 1985 after coming out as gay when he was a pastor in Louisiana.

"When I received the call from the bishop that I would receive my ordination back, it was one of delight and thanksgiving," Thompson said. "It has given our family a feeling of peace and a love relationship with the United Methodist Church."

After his tenure in ordained ministry in Louisiana and upon separating from his then-wife — the two of whom have a daughter together — Thompson started a new life in Nashville. He got a job with a UMC general agency, eventually met his now-husband, and became an active lay leader through his congregation, Edgehill UMC, and with the national movement for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the UMC. Thompson also stepped into leadership roles in the local conference and the Southeastern Jurisdiction as an openly gay layperson, making him one of the first to do so.

"My ministry in Nashville as a lay person has been as powerful and as deep as any ministry I had being ordained," said Thompson. "I would not want to relive much of my journey, but I wouldn't be who I am if I had not gone through it."

At this point, Thompson didn't see reinstatement as necessary. But a decision by the UMC General Conference to create a pathway for reinstating clergy inspired Thompson to petition the Louisiana Conference at the last minute. As part of that petition, Thompson included parts of his life story, and his ex-wife and daughter wrote letters on his behalf. Soon after, Louisiana Bishop Delores Williamston called Thompson to deliver the good news.

“If we’re talking about affecting real people, the way by which a clergy can be reinstated if they were defrocked because they were queer is maybe the most impactful thing we did around queer inclusion,” said Scott, reflecting on the material impact of general conference decisions at the local level. “It was literally the last thing we were able to pass.”

Edgehill UMC and Reconciling movement: A pro-LGBTQ movement in the United Methodist Church eyes future after conservative exodus

A daunting future, yet familiar mandate

Besides reinstatement, Scott and other progressive voices said many of the other general conference changes have yet to bear fruit in significant ways.

The UMC General Conference also reversed a prohibition on United Methodist clergy and churches blessing same-sex unions, lifted a so-called funding ban on United Methodist agencies supporting causes that “promote the acceptance of homosexuality,” and a resolution supporting full communion with the Episcopal Church.

Following the general conference, the Episcopal Church gathered for its general convention in Louisville, Kentucky and its House of Bishops approved a resolution supporting full communion with the UMC. It’s an important step to finalizing that relationship between the sister mainline Protestant denominations following bumpy negotiations over the Episcopal Church’s disagreement with the UMC’s now-defunct anti-LGBTQ+ policies.

With conferences recently commissioning and ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy, both Scott and Cox said it doesn’t guarantee a congregation will accept a pastor assigned to that community.

“People going into ministry now that the rules have changed will probably have an easier time legally, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it will change practically,” Cox said. “Just because the rules have changed doesn’t mean hearts and minds have.”

Also, many LGBTQ+ clergy will be in a similar position to Cox, who has started a two-year approval process to becoming a fully ordained elder. Once fully ordained, they can serve as clergy delegates at regional and denomination-wide legislative assemblies and “have the ability to order the life of the church,” Cox said.

That future work of shaping the church will only grow more demanding, especially at the local level, when local conferences face votes this next year to ratify the regionalization plan.

Though daunting, United Methodists' future mandate for a steadfast commitment to building a healthier church amid upheaval and disagreement isn't a new experience for Cox.

"Anytime we push further for a greater understanding of what it means to be a more inclusive church, I think that's always worth it," Cox said. "There's such power in remaining and building relationships."

TN conference aims to be "big tent": Tennessee United Methodists seek consensus, chart future after historic church splintering

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