

## RELIGION

# United Methodist bishops set, steady leadership sought for U.S. church after splintering



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## Key Points

Five United Methodist jurisdictions decide on new bishop assignments for the U.S. in the last of a series of major legislative decisions this year for the UMC.

More bishops will oversee administration for multiple local conferences due to budget cuts and need for reduction in total U.S. bishops.

As U.S. church enters new normal, heightened unrest among United Methodists in African countries leaves uncertainty about success of regionalization plan aimed at keeping global church together.

The new elections of two United Methodist Church bishops and appointments for the full roster of 32 across the U.S., though two-thirds the size the group was before a historic splintering in the denomination, is also perhaps the most stable it's been in five years.

In the last of the series of major legislative decisions starting with the UMC General Conference in early May, simultaneous gatherings for five regional policymaking bodies called jurisdictions decided this month how 32 bishops will shepherd the church through its new season of downsizing and rediscovery.

In a last-minute deviation from earlier expectations for the jurisdictional conferences, the Western Jurisdiction elected two new bishops. One of those new bishops, the Rev. Kristin Stoneking, became the third openly LGBTQ+ bishop in the denomination.

The actions on bishops and ultimately the minimal number of new bishop elections fulfilled a need to shrink United Methodist episcopal leadership in the U.S. due to drastic budget cuts following a yearslong conflict in which an exodus of churches upended budgets and administrative leadership. Now, fewer bishops will cover the same amount of ground all while a broader global context leaves questions about the fate of United Methodism's cross-cultural communion.

“I’m so humbled at this time, at this incredibly momentous, opportune time for us as a denomination to lean into all of the doors that are opening,” Stoneking said in a brief address to Western Jurisdiction delegates, who elected Stoneking on the 11<sup>th</sup> ballot on Friday.

The other two openly LGBTQ+ bishops in the UMC, outgoing Bishop Karen Oliveto and Bishop Cedrick Bridgeforth, were elected in the same jurisdiction. Stoneking helped organize a 2016 letter in which 111 United Methodist clergy came out as LGBTQ+.

“I commit to you to be a humble learner and to love. So, let’s keep loving. Loving without limits,” Stoneking said. “It will be messy, but we’ll find our way back to each other.”

Disagreements over theology and church policy, including dealing with LGBTQ+ rights, led 7,500-plus U.S. churches to leave the denomination between 2019-2023 through a process known as disaffiliation. Many of those churches, along with four UMC bishops, joined a more conservative breakaway denomination called the Global Methodist Church.

The UMC General Conference, which is the denomination’s top worldwide policymaking body, in early May in Charlotte, North Carolina approved a 38%-41% reduction in the denomination’s overall budget, including a \$82 million-\$87 million cut to a general fund that covers bishops’ salaries. The general conference also reversed a series of anti-LGBTQ+ restrictions and approved a plan to restructure the denomination.

The jurisdictions — comprised of groupings of local bodies, called annual conferences — achieved the task of reducing the number of U.S. bishops through a series of mandatory retirements and by opting not to elect new bishops. The Western Jurisdiction was the exception due another bishop recently deciding to retire and another taking long-term medical leave.

The jurisdictions also decided on new assignments for the 32 total bishops, 18 of whom will oversee multiple annual conferences. Compared to the episcopal leadership structure before the splintering, only four of 46 total bishops were assigned to oversee multiple annual conferences at the 2016 jurisdictional conferences.

“It causes you to look at everything not from the perspective of what we’ve done but from the perspective of what’s required to meet the missional needs today,” said Lovett Weems, who oversaw a comprehensive study of disaffiliations through a research center at the UMC-affiliated Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C.

In addition to staff reductions at the annual conference level, bishops might encounter challenges with overseeing multiple annual conferences with “very different personalities,” said Weems. Another scenario is that of conferences with higher disaffiliation rates, where there are fewer conservative churches that long defined the majority culture in that region.

Largely due to their high rate of disaffiliations, three annual conferences in Texas plan to decide on a merger later this year.

“Methodism has always, to its credit and to its detriment, reflected a lot of the culture of the locale where it is,” said Weems.

**Recent local actions on LGBTQ+ clergy:** How United Methodists across the US are responding to historic policy changes

## **As U.S. church enters new normal, unrest in Africa adds to uncertainty**

With the new episcopal leadership structure and now that disaffiliations have ended, U.S. bishops will settle into a new normal.

That new normal includes old problems, such as the trend of congregations closing due to aging and shrinking membership. But there are also new elements like “emerging faith communities” — a larger movement of innovative congregational models serving communities that split over disaffiliation and other nontraditional churchgoers — and guidance on new policies regarding same-sex unions.

But this new rhythm in the American church isn’t shared by its counterparts in other parts of the world, especially throughout Africa. Some United Methodist conferences on the continent have faced greater unrest in the past couple months, largely due to the UMC General Conference decision to reverse anti-LGTBTQ+ restrictions.

The Côte d’Ivoire Conference, the largest UMC conference on the continent, is on its way to leaving the denomination, while a similar desire within the Liberian Conference has sparked a revolt against Bishop Samuel Quire Jr. Quire’s statements on general conference actions. For instance, his support for the plan to restructure the denomination fueled backlash and even reportedly an incident in which protesters chased him, according to the Liberian news outlet FrontPage Africa.

All local United Methodist bodies will vote next year on whether to ratify a plan to restructure the denomination, known as regionalization. Aimed at giving local United Methodist authority more autonomy, including the more conservative areas in other countries, regionalization is an attempt at holding the denomination together despite differences over the recent LGBTQ-related changes in church policy.

Yet, the recent events in parts of Africa have only added to uncertainty about whether regionalization will receive the support it's expected to have in the U.S.

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