

Pastor of former Oklahoma United Methodist flagship church talks about life with cut ties

St. Luke's minister discusses year after church's exit from United Methodist Church



[Carla Hinton](#)

The Oklahoman



A woman who grew up in a prominent Oklahoma City church telephoned the house of worship's senior pastor to ask if he would officiate her wedding to another woman.

The Rev. Bob Long said yes — an answer he couldn't have given just over a year ago when his church, now known as [St. Luke's Methodist](#), was still affiliated with the United Methodist Church.

"We couldn't do it because that was illegal for us to do," he said.

What a difference a year makes.

St. Luke's, the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's flagship church, ended its affiliation with the United Methodist denomination in April 2023.

Long, 70, said the church, with a main campus at 222 NW 15 and two satellites, has experienced a year of new possibilities, such as same-sex weddings. The year has also brought a continuation of mission and ministry efforts affiliated with the church's former denomination and other organizations, as well.



After the exit

Ultimately, 127 Oklahoma churches left the United Methodist denomination as part of a worldwide schism over same-sex marriage, gay ordination and other issues. St. Luke's exit was arguably one of the more surprising departures, with some United Methodists and the community at large expressing shock that the largest United Methodist church in Oklahoma — and one of the more affluent — would cut long-held ties.

More: [Votes are in on whether St. Luke's will stay with the United Methodist denomination](#)

Time was of the essence for disaffiliating churches. Houses of worship hoping to sever denominational ties had to do so before a Dec. 31, 2023, deadline set by the denomination.

A special paragraph was added to the denomination's Book of Discipline, a policy guide, in 2019, that allowed churches wishing to disaffiliate over the issue of human sexuality to do so without being required to surrender their church buildings and other property assets to the denomination.

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There was some grumbling among Oklahoma United Methodists over St. Luke's reasons for leaving the denomination. Some said the church did not truly disagree with the gay inclusion ban and only wanted to exit due to disagreements with the denomination over money. If St. Luke's had a real bone to pick over the gay inclusion ban, why didn't they join with others who had been advocating for the LGBTQ+ community in the church for decades, detractors asked.

Long said the church held to their disagreement with the stiff penalties that the United Methodist Church enacted for violators of the ban. That was the stance St. Luke's took which allowed it to disaffiliate and keep its multi-million church buildings and other assets without having to surrender the properties to the denomination.

Regardless of what St. Luke's critics may have suspected, perhaps the biggest change since the church's disaffiliation is gay inclusion.

Open hearts

Long said he got the phone call about officiating at a gay wedding just days after St. Luke's disaffiliated. He said prior to disaffiliation, the church would have been compelled to uphold the United Methodist Church's ban that was then in place on same-sex marriage and gay ordination. Earlier this year, delegates at the United Methodist General Conference gathering voted to strike language that formed the foundation of the gay inclusion ban, effectively ending the decades-old prohibition.

Long said once the connection to the denomination was broken, he had no qualms about agreeing to perform the same-gender marriage ceremony.

"She was so grateful and her family was so grateful, and there was no question how much this couple loved each other," he said.

Since that time, Long said he's performed a handful of gay weddings. The church also has formed a community group for members of the LGBTQ+ community to grow in their faith. Called Open Hearts, the group meets one Sunday a month.

"It's actually becoming a rapidly growing Bible study in the church, Long said.

The minister said church leaders have found that there are many people who are the parents and brothers and sisters of people in the LGBTQ+ community, who are tired of having their child or their brother and sister "bashed all the time."

"They've been able to come to worship where I'm not going on and on about 'what are gay rights?'" Long said.

"They come here and I'll say things like, 'You know God loves you regardless of the your sexual orientation, whether you're Republican or Democrat or the color in your skin.'"

He said that message resonates with people today.

"It's so harsh — it's either 'You're with me or you're against me,' or 'There's only one way to look at things,' but that is not going to be our spirit," he said.

Continued partnership and support

Long said he understood some of the drama that ensued when St. Luke's announced its intentions to depart from the United Methodist Church. He said that was understandable because St. Luke's is the historic congregation that formed on the first Sunday after the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889.

"I can say that for us, we have not left with any kind of hard feelings or any kind of animosity," he said. "We're still cheering United Methodists. And, I'm very excited that the new bishop who has been appointed is Laura Merrill."

Merrill, the bishop of the Arkansas United Methodist Conference, was recently elected as the first female bishop of the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference. She is expected to assume her new post in September, and serve as leader of Oklahoma and Arkansas United Methodists.

Long said the church has remained Methodist at its core, though it is no longer part of a denomination. He said to that end, the church has partnered with United Methodist churches, churches affiliated with the Global Methodist Church denomination and the Kenyan Methodist Church, over the last year.

He said he knew people wondered if the church's aid to community ministries would dwindle after disaffiliation. But, he said the church did not end its support of several

missions and some United Methodist ministries like Neighborhood Services Organization (NSO), Skyline Urban Ministries and other organizations birthed out of the United Methodist Church. Long said this includes Oklahoma City University, which is affiliated with the denomination.



"We've always believed in OCU and we believed in NSO and Skyline, Circle of Care and CJAMM (Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries)," he said. "In that respect, nothing changed other than we've been able to increase what we give and do and serve all of these different institutions and organizations."

Long said just as the church has continued to lend its support to United Methodist ministries in Oklahoma, it has also given aid to the denomination's churches in other places, including the Lydia Patterson church in Texas. St. Luke's also sent funds to a United Methodist church in Maui in the aftermath of the tragic fire on the Hawaiian island.

Another example of the church's continued outreach and support to the community at large is St. Luke's oversight and expansion of the Meals on Wheels OKC program to include more senior adults who depend on the free meal program.

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More:[Meals on Wheels OKC helps 22,000 people each week. Meet the leader who coordinates it all](#)

'Church is doing really well'

At 70, Long would have been looking at mandatory retirement in two years if St. Luke's had remained with the United Methodist Church. The denomination's clergy are required to retire at 72.

Some critics of the church's disaffiliation argued that it would flounder without Long at the helm, particularly after leaving the United Methodist Church.

Long said he has no plans to retire just yet and he doesn't worry about what will happen to St. Luke's when he does.

"I have an incredible staff with a number of wonderful pastors who are great preachers, and the church is doing really well," he said.

"So, if you love what you're doing and the church is doing really well, then why not keep doing it? You know the day will come when for health reasons or you feel like God is leading you to something else, but that sure isn't right now. Right now, we're enjoying what we're doing and doing well."

The minister said his plan is to help steer St. Luke's as it continues to expand and grow throughout the Oklahoma City metro area. The church has an Asbury satellite at 1320 SW 38, and one in Edmond at 900 N Sooner Road, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2023.

"We all know how much Edmond is growing in our location, so we see nothing but a great future and growth at the church," he said.

More:['Let them go'; How St. Luke's survived efforts to thwart its United Methodist exit plans](#)

Congregation collaboration still being considered

What happened to St. Luke's plan to create a coalition of congregations that would collaborate with one another, regardless of some differences? Long proposed such an organization prior to St. Luke's exit from the United Methodist Church.

The minister said the plan is still being considered, but for now, the congregation is content being independent.

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"What we're finding is that for everybody who went through the disaffiliation process, it was difficult, it was emotional, it was hard enough that when everybody gets on the other side, it's almost kind of like there was a desire just to stop, take a breath, kind of reevaluate and say 'We're going to wait for God to lead us in where we're going to go,'" Long said.

He said the church has taken the last year to draw up new bylaws and procedures as an independent church. The time may come when St. Luke's may determine how it will relate or formally connect with other churches, but that isn't now.

"We're kind of finding our own way, just as other churches are doing," he said.

Through Broadway-themed sermon series, OKC church takes stand against antisemitism, hate



Carla Hinton

The Oklahoman



An Oklahoma church shared a message about the importance of standing against antisemitism and all forms of hate on Aug. 18 during its popular Broadway-themed sermon series.

The popular "St. Luke's on Broadway" sermon series at St. Luke's Methodist Church includes guest singers who perform classic songs from a Broadway show, while the Rev. Bob Long focuses his sermons on each musical's themes through a Biblical lens.

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Sunday, the sermon series focused on the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," which tells the story of a Jewish father and his daughters.

Long, St. Luke's longtime senior pastor, said the church hopes to raise awareness about the rise in antisemitism and other forms of hatred and bigotry by distributing 4,000 blue square lapel pins during Sunday worship services. The minister said the distribution is in conjunction with the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism's [#StandUptoJewishHate campaign](#).

The foundation was started in 2019 by Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots NFL team and chairman and chief executive officer of the Kraft Group, to address the rise in antisemitism in the U.S. and hate growing around the world. According to the foundation's website, the #StandUpToJewishHate campaign was begun to encourage people to speak out against antisemitism and hatred against Jewish people, show solidarity and support for the Jewish community and to speak out against all hate.

"The blue square is a symbol of Jewish identity and resilience, and it has been used by the Jewish community for centuries as a way to stand against hatred and persecution," the foundation said.

Long said the foundation agreed to send pins to the church for distribution in conjunction with the Broadway-style sermon series and its focus on "Fiddler."

"I said I would love to hand out blue squares that day to anybody who wants one, to be able to say, 'stand up to Jewish hate, stand up to all hate,'" Long said.

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"I am always saying, we don't all have to think alike to love alike."

More:[Oklahoma synagogue hosts first in-person post-pandemic Passover Seder](#)

The minister said he hopes the message will resonate with church members and the community at large.

"I love the comment that was made that said 'Politics is messy, international politics is really messy, but how I treat my neighbor is simple.' And, that's what I'm trying to emphasize," he said.



'Welcome sight'

Rabbi Vered Harris, spiritual leader of Temple B'nai Israel, said seeing more people around Oklahoma City wearing the blue square pins will be a "welcome sight."

"It will be a comfort to many Jewish people and a reminder of what it means to live in society that believes in decent and kind relations with our neighbors," Harris said.

The rabbi expressed her gratitude for St. Luke's commitment to raising awareness about an important issue and for the way the church's leaders promote kindness and compassion.

"Every expression against antisemitism is important and helpful to our world," she said. "It is an expression against all intolerance."

