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## **‘A positive new chapter’ for state Methodists**

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Oklahoma United Methodists recently welcomed a new bishop – the first woman elected to the post – after saying farewell to an outgoing bishop who earned their praise for his leadership during a difficult season of disaffiliation.

Bishop Laura Merrill took on her new role on Sept. 1, after the August retirement of Bishop Jimmy Nunn. Merrill was serving as bishop of the Arkansas United Methodist Conference when she was elected in July to also serve as leader of Oklahoma United Methodists, making her bishop of Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Does Merrill have a strategy for how she is going to lead United Methodists in two different states? What led to Nunn’s retirement and what are his future plans?

Both leaders answered these questions during a recent interview where they shared their hopes and aspirations for Oklahoma United Methodists, who represent one of the largest faith groups in the state.

### **‘A positive new chapter’**

Merrill, 61, currently lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, but she’s originally from Central Texas, specifically San Antonio. She appeared to be well aware of the University of Oklahoma and University of Texas Red River rivalry, but she said that’s a chat for another time.

“I was raised mostly in Austin, Texas, so, you know, there are football conversations to be had, but we don’t have to have those,” she said, with a grin.

Merrill said her father, the late Rev. J. Charles Merrill, was a Methodist pastor

who was “larger than life,” and so was her maternal grandfather. Church for her was “a place of great acceptance and affirmation.”

Merrill earned a bachelor’s degree from Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and a Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology at Emory University in 1995. She was ordained into the United Methodist ministry in 1996. In 2022, Merrill was elected a bishop and selected to lead the Arkansas Conference beginning in 2023. She has two young adult children: a son who lives in Boston and a daughter finishing up her undergraduate degree in San Marcos, Texas.

Merrill said she was at church camp at age 16 when she first felt stirrings of what would eventually evolve into a call to the ministry. She went on to serve in a mission intern program, traveling to places, including Latin America and the Arizona border. Merrill said it was in her last year of seminary that her calling became more clear and her path to becoming an ordained United Methodist minister was set.

The bishop said her dad and her family embraced her decision. She said her grandfather had once told her mother what she could and couldn't do as "girl, "and yet, by the end, my grandfather bought the robe for my ordination."

"Both of them were just beyond proud of me," she said. "They're both gone now, but I carry them both right here, and I'm so grateful for that heritage."

Merrill said it's important to note that she celebrates being able to follow in Nunn's footsteps, due to his integrity, intelligence, wisdom and the way he led United Methodists.

"It's a gift to the church, but it's a gift to me to follow him," she said.

She said her challenge in this moment is moving from having one conference to three conferences. Along those lines, Merrill said while she will continue to reside in Arkansas, her priority this fall is to be in Oklahoma to learn more about the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference and Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference that she now leads. Recently, she preached at a special service at McFarlin United Methodist Church in Norman, where she spoke to Oklahoma United Methodist leaders.

Merrill said she and her staff plan to use all the tools available to them, including technology, to "over communicate and have transparency" as relationships are built among the Oklahoma and Arkansas conferences.

She pointed out that other people have served as bishop of more than one conference, and she's going to try to learn from them. The faith leader said she also hopes to get to know the Oklahomans, including United Methodist leaders who have been working alongside Nunn in conference ministry.

"I'm just trusting that God is working for good, in all things, including this one, and that this is going to be a good, positive new chapter," she said.

"More than anything, my plans right now are to listen. ... I'm going to learn, I'm going to listen and also trust that these folks have already been doing their work. I'm here to be a partner in that work and to help figure out next steps.

### **'Principles guided me'**

At 67, Nunn is more than a few years shy of the mandatory retirement age of 75 for United Methodist clergy.

He said he decided to retire this year for several reasons.

“One of them is just, it’s time for me to pass the baton to somebody else – I’ve been in ministry 44 years,” Nunn said. “And, then the other part of that, I’ve just got some health issues I need to take care of, and I can’t do that maintaining the schedule that I’d need to keep as an active bishop.”

Nunn, who began his tenure as Oklahoma United Methodist bishop in 2016, said his final months as bishop were busy wrapping up his tenure and preparing the conference for the transition of a new leader. And, of course, no one knew exactly who would be the next Oklahoma bishop before Merrill’s election to the post in July.

Looking back, the retired bishop said he relied on godly principles throughout a season of disaffiliation, one of the more challenging of his career.

Across the world, United Methodist regional bodies like the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference spent several years negotiating with churches that wished to withdraw from the international United Methodist Church due to disagreements over same-sex marriage and ordination of openly gay clergy, among other issues.

In Oklahoma, 127 churches ultimately ended their affiliation with the denomination. Nunn presided over three special disaffiliation meetings and led the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference as it fought two lawsuits over disaffiliation that were filed against the conference by two Oklahoma City churches. The conference appealed the matter to the Oklahoma Supreme Court, which ruled in the regional organization’s favor and ended the churches’ exit bids.

Nunn said his faith in Christ never wavered, and he developed a fuller understanding of the nine words he often uses in his sermons and presentations – principles that he described as his “North Star”: Love God, love people, make a difference, make disciples.

“They’re the place that we point to and look at as we make disciples – we respect people of different perspectives, both within the Christian church and in other religions, as well, that we are not condemning of people and we respect religious freedom,” he said.

“So, in many ways, those principles guided me, even though the outcome wasn’t always what I would have preferred. I would have preferred everybody to remain United Methodist, but that wasn’t to be. Just have to look at it that people have gravitated to where they feel they need to be, and that’s OK.”

Nunn said he has returned to his native North Texas, specifically Lubbock, and he’s looking to the Lord to discover what his next adventure will be.

“The first thing I do is take some time to try to be still and listen to God for my next steps,” he said.

Nunn said he does know that he plans to play golf again, explore his genealogy, become active in a local church and, most importantly, spend more time with his family “because that just brings me a lot of joy.”

He said he has no qualms about Oklahoma United Methodists but plenty of hopes for their future.

The retiree said he hopes they remain united.

“And it might be the uniformity is around diversity, and that has multiple layers, so that’s something that I think that we’ll continue to see,” Nunn said.

“I think that Oklahoma has got excellent leaders. People on my staff and Cabinet have been outstanding, and I feel really good about leaving the conference, if you will, in their hands. With Bishop Merrill coming on, I know that she’s going to provide excellent leadership, as well.”

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