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Why a United Methodist court ruling closes all pathways for churches to leave denomination



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Key Points

United Methodist Church's highest court releases big-ticket decisions in fall docket following historic UMC General Conference earlier this year, which dealt with policies to manage splintering.

Despite end to main policy for churches to leave UMC, some regional conferences allowed exits through alternative route. UMC Judicial Council deems that alternative invalid.

Plan for United Methodist bishop to oversee regional conferences in East Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia overruled following complex decisions about oversight amid financial constraints.

Churches that still want to leave the United Methodist Church as part of a splintering in the denomination no longer have a procedural way to do so, or at least with their property in tow.

A new ruling by the largely Nashville-based denomination's highest court, the UMC Judicial Council, closed the only remaining pathway for church exits following another key policy's conclusion earlier this year. Among the rulings the court announced Tuesday, the UMC Judicial Council overruled a plan for regional administrative oversight in East Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The big-ticket ruling on pathways for church exits effectively ends the splintering in the UMC, though the denomination already took major steps in that direction at its top legislative assembly in May. Aside from outstanding questions about churches outside the U.S., this latest decision cements the ongoing trajectories for the UMC and its more conservative counterpart, the Global Methodist Church.

The Global Methodist Church, a breakaway denomination, gathered for its inaugural legislative assembly in September. That event reflected how a traditionalist insurgency within the UMC has since emerged as its own fully fledged institution.

“We are unable to offer a path to separation from the United Methodist Church for local churches,” the office of United Methodist bishop Rev. David Graves, the newly appointed bishop for the UMC’s Tennessee-Western Kentucky and Kentucky conferences, said in a statement Tuesday. “Of course, as has always been the case, individuals are free to pursue the faith expression of their choosing.”

The Kentucky Conference and the Alabama-West Florida Conference had sought clarity earlier this year from the denomination’s highest court about an alternative policy for church exits. The UMC Judicial Council’s ruling on Tuesday was the court’s response to those conferences’ appeals.

More than 7,500 churches left the UMC between 2019-2023 following disagreements over theology and church policy — including dealing with LGBTQ+ rights. Those churches exited through a policy called disaffiliation, also known as UMC Book of Discipline paragraph 2553. That policy expired at the end of 2023 and the UMC General Conference, which is the denomination’s top legislative body, removed the provision from the UMC Book of Discipline at the assembly’s historic meeting in May.

As an alternative to disaffiliation, at least five regional U.S. conferences authorized or were interested in allowing churches to continue leaving the denomination through a church closure policy.

Through this alternative policy, also known as UMC Book of Discipline paragraph 2549, those conferences formally closed a church that sought to leave and allow it to retain its property. But the UMC Judicial Council decided in its latest ruling that’s an antithetical interpretation of paragraph 2549 according to the legislation’s intent.

“The proposed use of ¶2549 contradicts the clear intent of ¶2549 by taking members and properties from the United Methodist Church and continuing religious activities as a new entity no longer a part of the United Methodist denomination,” the UMC Judicial Council said in its opinion, released Tuesday.

Specifically, the UMC Judicial Council said paragraph 2549 upholds the trust clause, a legal idea that vests a church’s property ultimately in the hands of a regional conference and not that individual church. Churches that disaffiliated, meaning they used paragraph 2553, were

able to leave with their property because they paid an exit fee. In some cases, churches still attempted to fight regional UMC administrative leadership in court over that exit fee.

Most recent Methodist news: New denomination forms amid splintering: What it means for the future of Methodism

An eventful year, plus new uncertainty with bishop's appointment

A series of rulings announced by the UMC Judicial Council for its fall docket of cases is the latest major development in an eventful year for the nation's largest mainline Protestant denomination.

It gathered for its long-awaited general conference in May in Charlotte, where delegates lifted anti-LGBTQ+ restrictions on ordination and same-sex weddings. The legislative assembly also gave initial approval to a plan to restructure the denomination's system of regional oversight, known as regionalization, that aims to give more autonomy to United Methodist authorities in other countries.

Regionalization, a collection of legislation that will require ratification within the next year, is largely seen as a compromise for more conservative United Methodists in the Philippines and throughout Africa despite the recent reversal of anti-LGBTQ+ restrictions. Still, some churches and at least one conference in Africa have sought to leave the denomination, even though no policy technically exists to allow non-U.S. churches to exit.

Later in the summer, 32 U.S. bishops received new appointments in an overall downsizing in the system of episcopal leadership to deal with financial constraints. Most of those 32 bishops are now responsible for managing multiple regional conferences. One of them, the Rev. Debra Wallace-Padgett, was set to manage regional conferences encompassing East Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

However, the UMC Judicial Council announced in a different ruling Tuesday, saying the plan for Wallace-Padgett's oversight is invalid because her appointment spans multiple jurisdictions, which are collections of regional conferences.

The plan for Wallace-Padgett's appointment "improperly modifies the directives of the General Conference," the UMC Judicial Council said in a ruling Tuesday. The court didn't

suggest an alternative solution, leaving Wallace-Padgett's ultimate appointment in a state of uncertainty.

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