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New United Methodist bishop in Tennessee, Kentucky on road ahead after historic splintering



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Key Points

Following historic splintering in denomination, United Methodist Church saw major policy and administrative changes this year. As part of that, many U.S. bishops received new assignments.

United Methodist Bishop Rev. David Graves steps into a new leadership assignment for Tennessee and Kentucky after previous assignments in Alabama and Georgia.

Graves' current assignment shares traits with his last role, among which is a major loss of churches to disaffiliations and added responsibilities to manage multiple teams of conference staff.

Bishop David Graves is taking over local leadership for the United Methodist Church and will draw upon his past experience in neighboring states as the denomination charts a new path forward.

The UMC is at a critical juncture after a historic splintering in which thousands of churches left the UMC amid disagreements over theology and church policy — including dealing with LGBTQ+ rights.

Graves takes over as the new episcopal leader for regional conferences encompassing Kentucky and most of Tennessee, a new assignment following stint overseeing regional conferences encompassing Alabama and Georgia. Those conferences sustained similar losses as that of Tennessee and Kentucky during the splintering.

The conferences Graves last oversaw, the Alabama-West Florida and South Georgia conferences, respectively lost 43% and 50% of its 2019 church totals through a process called

disaffiliation, according to statistics reported by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership, a research center out of the UMC-affiliated Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C.

The Tennessee-Western Kentucky and the Kentucky conferences, respectively, lost 38% and 49% of its 2019 totals.

Despite this toll, Graves is stepping into his new role not with a sense of despair. Rather, he feels relieved the conflict is mostly over, prepared to deal with the added responsibilities most U.S. United Methodist bishops took on this year, and eager to invest in new priorities.

“It’s been freeing for me because I can now focus my passions on what God called me to do,” Graves said in a sit-down with *The Tennessean* at the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference office, which shares a building with several UMC agencies that oversee administration for the whole global denomination. “I wasn’t called to lead churches out. I wasn’t called to try to answer everybody’s questions theologically about a lot of issues.”

Graves succeeds Rev. Bill McAlilly, who after 12 years retired in July from his post as the UMC’s Nashville-based bishop. That assignment, due to consolidations in the wake of financial constraints, now includes the Louisville-based bishop’s responsibilities. For Graves, that means he’s overseeing two sets of staff and routinely traveling between Nashville and Louisville.

“I call myself about a circuit riding bishop,” Graves said, nodding to the early Methodist tradition of circuit riding preachers.

In a sit-down interview with *The Tennessean*, Graves reflected on what he learned from his last assignments during the most intense period in the UMC’s splintering and whether it affects how he approaches these new assignments.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The conferences your most recent past assignments encompassed were among the regions hit hardest by the splintering. More than a third of churches in the Alabama-West Florida and South Georgia conferences saw at least a third of total churches disaffiliate, as did 18 other conferences. Also, the Alabama-West Florida Conference faced a lawsuit from 44 congregations in response to a trustees decision about disaffiliation criteria — a case that mirrored other UMC-related court battles elsewhere. What was your experience navigating this conflict?

Graves: The hardest part was seeing the division in the churches. Because God called us to unity, even in the midst of our disagreements.

In the two conferences, I had 600 churches disaffiliate. That was just painful because you've built relationships with these people. ... Both conferences were different. In South Georgia, anything we did was a breeze; it was just a different spirit. In Alabama-West Florida, it was more divisive.

Leading in both of those taught me to be a non-anxious presence and try to help both those conferences move forward.

Expand on what you mean you learned to be a “non-anxious presence.” How did you practice it in the past and why is it an important lesson for the future?

I think that's one of my gifts. Not to become argumentative or mistreat people, even when they are really coming at you. A lot of times, I would reply "thank you" or "You've made your case and it's time to end the conversation." I tried not to get overly emotional. That helped me see the tension and how to lower the temperature.

That's where everybody (in the UMC) is now. They're looking for the bishop and the annual conference to help lead them...In my new role, here's what I've noticed in the last 61 days: we don't have the same things to argue about anymore. So, I just sense we are ready to move forward. That's surprised me a little that we've jumped there so quickly. We are ready to move on.

Within these first 60 days in your new assignment, how have you sought to juggle the dual responsibilities overseeing the Tennessee-Western Kentucky and Kentucky conferences and working with separate teams of conference leadership?

My primary focus is getting to know both conferences. They are similar in a lot of ways, but contextually are different and have different needs.

With the leadership in both conferences, we're already planning to do a mission trip to Western North Carolina. Both cabinets are going and other conference staff. We felt it's a great beginning: "Let's do mission together." We're also going to have a staff meeting together in January and really try to get to know one another because they have the same bishop. We've also been in conversation about shared resources, especially around programmatic needs.

So, it's really getting to know each annual conference distinctly and then finding ways to come together. It organically moves forward from that.

Aside from the administrative needs, what are other priorities you've focused on at this early point in your leadership for United Methodist communities in Tennessee and Kentucky?

Mental health is big for us as we move forward. That's one of my personal priorities because if we're going to have healthy churches, we've got to have healthy pastors. Everybody is struggling with mental health. So, how do I care for my mental health and how do I help those around me care for their mental health? How do I model that?

Latest UMC news: Why a United Methodist court ruling closes all pathways for churches to leave denomination

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