

How Lovers Lane pastor kept diverse church together amid LGBTQ issues rift

Stan Copeland, retiring senior pastor of Lovers Lane UMC, will deliver his last sermon on Easter Sunday; the resurrection story can give new life to people in “tomb times,” or times that “depress and divide us.”



By **Adrian Ashford**

Apr. 17, 2025|Updated 6:00 a.m. CDT|7 min. read



The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, poses for a photo in his church, Wednesday, March 26, 2025, in Dallas. (Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer)

The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, grew up in Chandler, a small East Texas town.

“Church was the lifeblood of the community,” said Copeland, now 65.

Chandler had about six churches when Copeland was a boy, and the churches often worked together, sharing a cemetery and hosting joint Thanksgiving and Memorial Day services.

Copeland’s journey in ministry took him to big, urban churches — First United Methodist Church Houston, and, more recently, Lovers Lane UMC in Dallas. Now, Copeland is preparing to retire after a 47-year ministry career.

He will deliver his last sermon at the church on Easter Sunday. He's preaching about how the message of the Easter resurrection story can give new life to people living in "tomb times," as he put it, or times that "depress and divide us."

Copeland, who will retire on July 1, shepherded Lovers Lane UMC through a tumultuous time for United Methodists, as the denomination was torn apart by a schism over LGBTQ people. The conflict ended with the disaffiliation of over 7,600 churches.

Amid that split, Copeland held together a church with large constituencies of both LGBTQ people and people from countries where gay marriage is illegal, who may not be in favor of LGBTQ pastors or weddings. Copeland said his East Texas roots taught him the value of living in community with different kinds of Christians.

"The best thing about that environment," he said, "is that it teaches people that we can all get along — if we focus on our faith first and not our politics first."

Instead of voting on disaffiliation itself, Copeland said his church voted on whether to hold a disaffiliation vote, or to forego a debate. Members voted at the end of church services over the course of three weeks — and 97% of them

voted that they didn't want to argue about disaffiliation any further, according to Copeland.

After he retires from Lovers Lane, Copeland will spend a lot more time on his family farm in Chandler. He's missed the pine-covered hills and the time with his aging parents, and is already hard at work on a garden on the property.



The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, rides a tractor in the backyard of his parents' house, Monday, April 7, 2025, in Chandler. (Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer)

Chandler is where he first learned the value of unity and relationships across difference, Copeland said. But the small town isn't immune from the polarization plaguing the UMC and the country. Copeland's childhood UMC

church chose to disaffiliate from the same denomination Copeland fought to hold together.

“Where’s God in the middle of this?”

Copeland’s young life in Chandler revolved around family and church. He knew both sets of grandparents, and two of his great-great-grandmothers.

He’s the fifth generation United Methodist in his family. He had a Sunday school pin growing up that marked 13 years of perfect attendance.

At 20, Copeland met his wife Tammy, then 19, who said she was drawn to his kindness. “I learned by dating him that he was a guy of integrity,” she said, “and he really worked with other people well.”

By that winter, they were talking about marriage. The couple married at First Baptist Church in Tyler on May 23, 1981. Days after their wedding, they went to Houston for a regional meeting of United Methodists in Texas.

Tammy Copeland said she likes to tell people that her husband “took me to conference on our honeymoon.”

Copeland left Chandler to attend Lon Morris College and Centenary College of Louisiana, then seminary at Saint Paul School of Theology and United Theological Seminary.

When he was just 26, he received a diagnosis that would test his faith. Copeland said doctors told him he had terminal leukemia. He likely would not live to see his 30th birthday.

“We made a pact that if anything happened to him, I would raise our son in Chandler around a lot of people that were relatives and knew Stan and could support me,” Tammy Copeland said.

Stan Copeland said the UMC appointed him to serve as associate pastor at a Houston church where he could join an experimental drug protocol at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center that he credits with saving his life. Copeland said he was one of only a handful of people the hospital’s interferon injection treatment worked on at that time.

“It called everything into question,” Copeland said of his diagnosis. “Where’s God in the middle of this? Do miracles really happen?”

He said he’ll have to wait for heaven to find out most of those answers. What he did gain from that experience, though, is a deeper faith, and a heart for those facing sickness and death.

Now, he says he’d rather officiate 10 funerals than one wedding. “At a funeral, they need you,” he explained. “They need you to get up there and say some word that will make them feel better about their loss and their grief. You know exactly where you stand.”



The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, speaks at a memorial service for Barbara Fisher at the church, Saturday, March 29, 2025, in Dallas. (Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer)

A multicultural church

Copeland long dreamed of building a multicultural church, according to the Rev. Donna Whitehead, who has been an associate pastor at Lovers Lane for about 25 years.

She said Copeland began special programming at the church early on specifically for African immigrant congregants.

Copeland wanted the church's services to be open to anyone, but also wanted Lovers Lane to offer "affinity-type worship" options where people would feel

most at home, according to Whitehead. So after the church saw an influx of African immigrants, Copeland created an African fellowship program.

The church still has an African fellowship service on Sundays that features worship in both English and African languages such as Shona, a language primarily spoken in Zimbabwe.



The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, 65, right, talks with his father Don Copeland, 88, at Don's house, Monday, April 7, 2025, in Chandler. (Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer)

One of the most important decisions Copeland made, according to Whitehead, was his choice to allow a Bible study for LGBTQ people to meet on the church's campus.

Figuring out how to balance his commitment to United Methodist church doctrine with the experiences of his LGBTQ congregants was challenging, Copeland said.

Copeland recounted one particularly tough situation he faced before his denomination officially voted to lift its bans on same-sex weddings and LGBTQ pastors.

Two women in his church wanted to get married, he said, after one of them had been diagnosed with breast cancer. They asked if they could marry outside of the church itself in a house on church property. Copeland said he knew that would still be against church rules, so he wrote to six of his lay leaders and explained the situation.

“All six of them said, ‘Well, tell them they can have the wedding at our house,’” Copeland said. They ended up holding that wedding at one of the lay leader’s houses. The house was “decked out” for the wedding, Copeland said, and he’ll never forget it.

Copeland said his church followed the rules of the UMC, and that he brought up social issues from the pulpit, like LGBTQ people in the church, gradually, and tried not to be “divisive.” He hoped the UMC, like Lovers Lane, could continue to be a place where people with different views could sit beside each other.

“I made the case that we’re not talking about, ‘Everybody has to believe alike.’ We’re talking about that compatibility. Can you be in a [denomination] that thinks differently than your church does, or your preacher does, or you do?”

“We never have, as Methodists, been people who all think alike or believe alike or look alike or vote alike,” he said, “and that’s what’s made us wonderful.”

Coming home

On a Monday visit to his childhood church, Copeland stands on the stage where he says he preached his first sermon, at 16 years old.

First Methodist Church Chandler — formerly First United Methodist Church Chandler — chose to leave the denomination Copeland worked to hold together.

Copeland says the room that was once the church’s sanctuary, now a fellowship hall, looks nothing like it used to. He points out where the altar and orange-cushioned pews used to stand. Now, the room is covered in gray carpet, with a screen projector behind the stage.



The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, looks at an old photo of him, right, as an eagle scout that hangs in First Methodist Church Chandler, Monday, April 7, 2025, in Chandler. (Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer)

As he wanders around, two women greet him and, like most people Copeland runs into that afternoon, ask about his family.

“How’s your mama?” asks one of the women, who is a volunteer at the church and went to Copeland’s high school. They share the different years they graduated, and Copeland tells her how his parents are coping with several health issues.

“It’s good seeing you Stan,” she says as he gets ready to leave.

Back in his car, Copeland reflects on how Chandler has changed. He says a local election has pitted town members against each other, and in Chandler — like in many places in the U.S. — “you can’t work from the middle anymore.”



The Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, shows hams hanging in a smokehouse he built on his family farm, Monday, April 7, 2025, in Chandler. (Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer)

Copeland has many plans for what he'll do in Chandler after he retires. He built himself a smokehouse on the family farm, where country hams have been hanging from the ceiling since December.

He looks happiest atop his tractor, working on his new garden. Tractor time, he says, is his favorite time to think and pray.

"I'm gonna try to fit in here," Copeland says of Chandler. "Think I can?"

Adrian Ashford covers faith and religion in North Texas for The Dallas Morning News.