

# THE TENNESSEAN

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## RELIGION

# What a United Methodist conference in Zimbabwe says about churches' desire to stay in UMC



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Nashville Tennessean

Updated Oct. 28, 2025, 6:52 p.m. CT

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### Key Points

The Tennessean - USA Today Network dispatched reporters to Zimbabwe as part of a reporting project on the United Methodist Church in advance of results on vote to restructure denomination.

UMC Zimbabwe East Annual Conference votes on plan to restructure denomination, known as regionalization, at Oct. 25 gathering. They also celebrate new bishop's proposed business development plans.

Overall membership at UMC churches in Zimbabwe has declined in recent years, but the two UMC conferences are adding new churches annually.

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*This story was produced in partnership with the [Pulitzer Center](#).*

RUWA, ZIMBABWE — United Methodist clergy and laity excitedly greeted Zimbabwe bishop Rev. Gift T. Machinga, welcoming him and his vision for the Southern African nation.

Machinga, [elected in March](#), is expected to continue leading a unified Zimbabwe church. The same can't be said for other African nations, where [confusion and disagreement about legislative changes in the denomination](#) have fractured large portions of congregants.

But Machinga and his predecessor, retired bishop Rev. Eben Nhiwatiwa, have undertaken tremendous education campaigns to ensure their peoples' commitment to the United Methodist Church (UMC). A joyous celebration of Machinga at the

UMC Zimbabwe East Annual Conference during an Oct. 25 gathering reflected that push for United Methodist fidelity had sunk in.

Shortly after, the 637 delegates voted on whether to ratify a plan to restructure the denomination. The results of this conference's vote, for a plan known as regionalization, is unknown until all regional conferences in an ongoing worldwide vote are tallied by early November.

Regionalization's prospective passage is seen as a critical step to maintaining the UMC's global communion following a costly splintering — including over disagreements about LGBTQ+ rights. The plan to restructure the historically Nashville-based UMC will allow United Methodists across the globe to maintain policies and practices that align with local customs and laws.

Regionalization allows the UMC to remain “one big family but have different understandings based on different regions,” delegate Tazvionezi Nyarota said at the Zimbabwe East Annual Conference. Nyarota represents a special delegation of Zimbabweans living overseas who are still aligned with their UMC conference back home. She's from Canada, but there are other Zimbabwe immigrant churches in the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates and Australia.

Many Zimbabweans see regionalization as an opportunity to craft their own unique identity within the UMC. But it's not the only reason United Methodism is appealing.

In a presentations earlier Oct. 25, delegates heard plans for a newly formed business development arm of the bishop's office. The new arm, an autonomous enterprise with its own board of directors and staff, will seek out alternative income sources beyond parishioners' tithing. This includes renting out conference-owned property for office space or leasing other church-owned property for agriculture or mining. This additional cash flow will support other strategic initiatives, a plan for which conference leadership presented Oct. 25.

“We are now going to enjoy life, we have suffered enough,” a delegate sang in Shona, part of the Bantu family of languages spoken in most parts of Zimbabwe, following the business development presentation.

Overall membership in Zimbabwe churches has declined in recent years. The two Zimbabwean conferences recorded a total membership of 146,023 in 2025. But the conferences also add new churches annually, which they decided to do at the Oct. 25 gathering for the Zimbabwe East Annual Conference.

“Whereas they’re petitioning to close (UMC) churches elsewhere, we’re petitioning to open churches,” Machinga told the delegates.

*Rev. Taurai Maforo, communications director for Machinga's office, provided translation services for The Tennessean from Shona to English.*

**Other reporting from Zimbabwe:** ['Whoo whoo, our elephant!' United Methodists in Zimbabwe unify ahead of historic decision](#)

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