

# THE TENNESSEAN

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## RELIGION

# As fracturing harms UMC brand, how a Zimbabwe high school displays pride in denomination



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### Key Points

The Tennessean - USA Today Network dispatched two journalists to Zimbabwe as part of reporting project on the United Methodist Church in advance of historic decision to restructure denomination.

High school and primary school in Murewa, Zimbabwe, which collectively enrolls more than 2,000 students, demonstrates pride in the United Methodist brand, a contrast to trends elsewhere in Africa.

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

MUREWA, ZIMBABWE — The joyous screams and claps of hundreds of high school students boomed outside the sanctuary at Murewa Centre Mission of the United Methodist Church.

It was even louder inside the cavernous chapel, painted in teal and yellow. The students had gathered for an Oct. 27 chapel service before classes.

At the center of the dark hall, filled with students in maroon jackets, the UMC insignia branded the pulpit at the center of students' focus. The United Methodist symbol of the cross and flame was also on the students' jackets and a gate by the front of the Murewa mission center, comprised of primary and secondary schools.

United Methodist leadership with the bishop's office preached to students, who welcomed the leaders with excited howls. Student chaplain Rev. Barnabas Chikunya

delivered a short sermon on “if you encounter Christ, you will never be the same.” Students yipped in affirmation, a sign the UMC-backed school has instilled in students a commitment to the denomination and its doctrine.

Other students were dozing off during the morning chapel service or looking mindlessly in the distance, as young adolescents do.

The UMC’s international presence, through schools like the Murewa mission and hospitals, bears profound visual significance. That matters for whether the church in these regions fractures amid a splintering in the church.

“I feel honestly the cross and flame worldwide is a strong brand identifier and when there continues to be narratives of ‘we can’t get along’... that impacts how people will engage or choose not to engage,” Rev. Aleze Fullbright, general secretary of the UMC General Conference, said in a Sept. 30 interview. “And I do feel that does create hardship for those pastors and laypersons who try to advance the mission of Christ.”

Whereas United Methodists in Zimbabwe have signaled an overall desire to remain in the UMC, others in Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Liberia and Kenya have left the historically Nashville-based denomination. A splintering in the denomination — often centered on a debate about LGBTQ+ rights in the church — cost the denomination more than 7,500 churches in the U.S. between 2019-2023, and the [conflict has now escalated in Africa](#).

But in Murewa, students are thriving under the banner of United Methodism. Aside from the prevalence of the cross and the flame on campus, students’ knowledge of the larger denominational reality is mixed.

“They (campus pastors) are there to revive our spirits, especially when we are afraid at times. They are there to encourage us and give us strength,” student Marara Tadiwa said.

“Not only spiritually but also emotionally. Sometimes we do bad things unfortunately and they remind us how to humble ourselves and to live in community,” student Charlaine Charuma said, echoing Tadiwa.

Britney Komhoti, another student, said she didn’t know much about United Methodism, but managed to easily list off the names of the current bishop and his predecessor. Granted, the name of retired bishop Rev. Eben Nhiwatiwa is plastered on plaques throughout the campus on buildings he dedicated.

The Murewa high school enrolls 1,162 students. A top priority for their education is digitization and computer science, and its science programs, deputy head George Marvanyka said. The primary school enrolls 1,187 students. There, students can learn about farming with a garden, live pigs and poultry.

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

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