

THE TENNESSEAN

A liberated Zimbabwe church after UMC splintering points to historic shift across Africa



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Key Points

United Methodist Church recently ratified landmark restructuring giving regions outside U.S. more say. Many call it the "decolonizing" of the denomination after costly splintering.

The Tennessean visited Zimbabwe and witnessed ward for expecting mothers, hospital, high school and flagship college to understand state of UMC ministries post-splintering.

Here's the story of how the UMC in Zimbabwe played a critical role in country's liberation from apartheid and how it's navigated a contentious splintering, and whether it's affected major ministries.

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

MUTARE, ZIMBABWE — The expecting mothers ushered their roommate Tinashe Mawondo to the hospital at Old Mutare Mission center, mere paces from a ward where the pregnant women reside.

The group of 10 women surrounded Mawondo to pray for her and then picked up her belongings and sent her off to new beginnings. Those 10 other women will trace the same journey in a matter of weeks — many are due in mid-November.

“It’s a very friendly environment,” Charity Chimanmani, an expecting mother, said in an interview in Shona, a local language spoken in many parts of Zimbabwe. “We have taught each other unity and to give each other kind words.”

The women cook for one another and help teach each other sewing. They don’t pay a cent for lodging or food.

The ward for expecting mothers is the latest addition to the Old Mutare Mission, a nexus of United Methodist Church ministries that also include the hospital, a church, two schools and a children's home. The campus is sacred not just for its ability to serve many different community needs, but because it's the site of United Methodism's founding in Zimbabwe 128 years ago.

"It tells people what the UMC is all about," Rev. Tadeus Mwadiwa, the head administrator for Old Mutare Mission, said. "People want to identify with such truths."

But a costly splintering in the historically Nashville-based UMC has shaken that confidence in one of the most influential Protestant bodies worldwide. An exodus of churches in the U.S. and [parts of Africa, fueled by debates over LGBTQ+ rights](#), upended revenue projections. Likely, it will mean diminished investment in ministries across the globe.

So far, the Old Mutare Mission has weathered the storm.

"The United Methodist Church is not going to die here," Mwadiwa said.

The splintering in the denomination is just the latest obstacle for United Methodism in Zimbabwe, and that it's managed to overcome. Before, the church suffered under the cruel apartheid regime of former Southern Rhodesia Prime Minister Ian Smith. The United Methodist bishop back then mobilized rank-and-file parishioners to resist Smith's government and support the Black nationalist movement that ultimately liberated Zimbabwe.

This legacy of the church advocating for liberation for Black Africans, and building institutions around that vision, has laid the groundwork for yet another turning point. The [UMC just ratified a landmark restructuring that gives more autonomy](#) to United Methodists outside the U.S.

The restructuring, known as regionalization, raises a [deeply existential question about balancing different identities](#). In Zimbabwe, that question is about what it means to be a Zimbabwean United Methodist, an African United Methodist, and a global United Methodist all at the same time.

Many have described this moment as the "decolonizing" of UMC, one of the most influential Protestant groups worldwide.

“When the missionary came, they said there is a Christian way of life, which meant you had to separate (from) everything,” Angolan bishop Rev. Gaspar João Domingos said in an interview. “So, here in Africa with all the traditions, many things we put aside because we wanted to be a Christian.”

Domingos is chancellor for Africa University, the UMC’s flagship college on the continent in Mutare, Zimbabwe — just across the valley from Old Mutare Mission. At Africa University, students from 30-plus African nations are preparing for leadership in their respective countries and are exposed to a broader pan-African identity.

“Everything is changing now,” Domingos said. “Now, we are rising.”

Latest UMC news: [Post-splintering, UMC ratifies restructuring, gives autonomy to non-US churches](#)

Mobilizing a church for liberation

The very existence of Africa University and the Old Mutare Mission, in their present form today as institutions serving Black Africans, was at one point a privilege.

At the Old Mutare Mission hospital on Oct. 29, at least 50 patients are waiting to meet with one of only two doctors on staff. The facility is the only one of its kind within a 100-kilometer radius, Dr. Evans Matiki said.

Matiki and his colleague tend to ailments that range from pediatric infections to trauma victims who suffered an accident working in nearby mines. They deliver about 150 babies per month.

Meanwhile, the nearby children’s home is sometimes the only place that will take abandoned children. A state agency has dropped off children at the Old Mutare Mission gates before, Mwadiwa said.

Each residence at the children’s home is supervised by an older woman, called a “mother.” The residences possess two bedrooms with bunks, a living room with a TV and a kitchen. Many of the children help with maintenance at a nearby farm, which produces their food.

But 56 years ago, this very same property was confined to Southern Rhodesia’s white minority population. A 1969 law under Smith’s government, called the Land Tenure Act,

literally halved the country's land mass and divided the property along racial lines. Black residents' physical movements were confined to their half.

In June 1970, United Methodists began to fight back.

They gathered at this very same campus, the Old Mutare Mission, and decided to endorse a statement that said the Land Tenure Act "cannot be reconciled with the Christian Faith."

Later, Smith's government made exceptions for religious organizations.

The late Zimbabwe bishop Rev. Abel T. Muzorewa, who organized the June 1970 gathering, recounted how the event was a turning point for the church's role in advocating for Zimbabwe's liberation.

"Some denominations and individual church leaders still believe that the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe is none of the Church's business. I thank God that such people are in a negligible minority," Muzorewa said in his autobiography. "Some of these same critics do not believe in the Africanization of the church. The predominant spirit of our people, however, sees the hand of God in our liberation struggle."

Muzorewa, the first Black Zimbabwean to serve as bishop for the UMC in Zimbabwe, later became the longtime executive for a coalition group representing several Black nationalist parties that fought for Zimbabwe's independence. He eventually served as prime minister for a brief stint during an interim government that preceded Zimbabwe's full independence.

Building a church for liberation

The Murewa High School students' hype during an Oct. 27 chapel resembled more closely the enthusiasm of a pep rally for homecoming.

Their applause, cheering and yipping boomed throughout a cavernous sanctuary, part of the UMC's Murewa Centre Mission in a remote commerce hub located 90 kilometers from Harare. Hundreds of adolescents appeared receptive, excited even, to listen to chaplain Rev. Barnabas Chikunya preach on, "if you encounter Christ, you will never be the same."

In [interviews after chapel ended](#), students recited core tenets of United Methodist belief. For student Charlaine Charuma, pastoral staff on campus help her mature "not only spiritually but also emotionally," she said. "Sometimes we do bad things unfortunately and they remind us how to humble ourselves and to live in community."

As students filter to class from chapel, with their chairs in tow, they pass signs that remind them “say no to drugs,” “both genders are equal,” and “don’t marry them.” The last message is a reference to a practice that’s common in some parts of Zimbabwean society in which young women or teenage girls are married and soon after are rearing children.

Deputy head of school George Marvanyka said a top priority is fully digitizing the campus, meaning it’s equipping each student to use computers for class work.

Plaques on many buildings that commemorate dedications by former Zimbabwe bishop Rev. Eben K. Nhiwatiwa are visible reminders of the UMC’s role in civic life following Zimbabwe’s independence.

Prior to Smith’s regime and its crackdown on religious schooling, Muzorewa said in his autobiography that “not only did the church provide the schooling for future Zimbabwean nationalists, but also it gave significant opportunities for leadership.”

Muzorewa took steps toward reviving this potential during the end of his tenure, most notably when he donated land in Mutare to establish Africa University. But it was during Nhiwatiwa’s leadership, starting in 2004 and ending in March 2025 with his retirement, that these institutions expanded.

Today, the UMC operates 37 schools and 15 hospitals or health clinics, according to an analysis of church records. Nhiwatiwa declined an interview request, citing his inactive status in denomination leadership.

But what many saw as Nhiwatiwa’s praiseworthy relentlessness, Rev. Forbes Matonga called it “ruthlessness.”

“For me, you can’t say he’s a hero. He’s not,” Matonga said in an interview. Matonga unsuccessfully ran against Nhiwatiwa for bishop in 2004, and ever since was an antagonist to the former bishop as part of a larger fight across the UMC.

Matonga deepened alliances with a well-resourced traditionalist [movement that fought to uphold policies restricting LGBTQ+ rights in the church](#). This group over time criticized many United Methodist bishops, Nhiwatiwa included, as institutionalists who made compromises to accommodate the denomination’s progressive wing.

“Bishop Nhiwatiwa and his accomplices were decimating the African voice,” Matonga said. “Actually, he is one of the persons who left the church in this mess.”

Matonga and his allies in other African nations increasingly viewed United Methodism as antithetical to their religious convictions and their African identity. Matonga and other popular traditionalist voices in Liberia and Nigeria have [since left the UMC and serve in leadership roles for the Global Methodist Church](#).

“For me back then the church had no problem...it was difference with individuals running the church and not the church itself,” Matonga said in an interview. “But this time around, it is the United Methodist Church itself that has changed. It is the United Methodist Church that is wrong.”

Back story from UMC General Conference: [United Methodists took historic steps toward inclusion but ‘big tent’ work has just begun](#)

Financing a church for liberation

At an Oct. 25 gathering for the [UMC Zimbabwe East Annual Conference](#), delegates voted on [whether to ratify regionalization](#), affirmed a report for a new strategic plan, and learned about Zimbabwe bishop Rev. Gift K. Machinga’s choices for new executive staff to serve on his cabinet.

During a ceremony announcing staff changes, Machinga dramatically unveiled each of the new cabinet members and to great fanfare. The person whom Machinga just named proceeded to the front, but with three to four of their peers dragging them as if the news shocked them into paralysis.

The sheer excitement was a vote of confidence in Machinga’s leadership, which delegates expressed other moments that day. “We’ve been praying...but with this report, that mission has been accomplished,” a delegate said from the floor. “I’m quite impressed, we’re going somewhere,” another delegate said.

But it could have gone a different direction.

In March, Matonga ran against Machinga for bishop and if he succeeded, would have tried to lead the whole UMC in Zimbabwe out of the denomination. The same legislative maneuver succeeded in Côte d'Ivoire, and a [similar attempt in Liberia](#) failed.

Matonga joined the Global Methodist Church soon after losing the election to Machinga. Since then, he said 60 clergy and 100 congregations have joined the breakaway group. Unlike their counterparts in Liberia or Nigeria, Matonga said he won't try to wrest control of United Methodist-owned assets.

"No, we are only taking people," Matonga said.

Machinga was not available for an interview with The Tennessean but responded to a request for comment. "What was expected to be a great exodus turned into a testimony of God's sustaining power for the remnant stayed, and the Church remained strong," the bishop said in a statement.

Yet, the new administration faces an even steeper challenge of financial self-sustainability. There is less annual revenue amid an economic downturn, plus funding for ministries across the world is less predictable as [UMC general agencies struggle with budget cuts](#).

Recently, Machinga established a business development unit to source untapped revenue. The progress of this proposal is a measure of regionalization's success, or lack thereof.

"The establishment of the Business Development Unit is not just an economic initiative; it is a prophetic act of faith, ensuring that our Church remains vibrant and strong for generations to come," Machinga said in a statement.

The church, in its difference finds liberation

A soft sunset dipped behind the Mutare mountains on Oct. 28. The orange glow it casts complements the warm collegiality among Africa University classmates as they compete on the soccer pitch or the cricket court.

This convergence on the athletic fields is happening elsewhere on campus, from the chapel to the dining hall to the dorms. Students rotate roommates every semester, and each rotation they room with students who originate from different a African country.

"Having a roommate from another country is like I'm sleeping in another country while I'm in the same room," student Richard Kiyimba, from Uganda, said in an interview with a group of students.

James Yellan kamara, from Sierra Leone, likened everyday interactions at Africa University to traveling cross-continent. “Your mindset shifts and you think differently than a person in just one place,” Yellan kamara said. “Seeing people who aim for a higher vision who want to see themselves better... you see the way you want to do things different.”

Kevin Eliezer, from Mozambique, said his experience rooming with an Ethiopian student was eye opening because of Ethiopia’s history as one of few African nations not to be colonized. Aliyyha Hlabiso said she recently attended a party for Kenyan student and though she’s from Zimbabwe, she joked “I think I’m now part of the Kenyan community.”

Brian Lupao, from Kenya, said he’s learned at Africa University “I’m a pan-African who wishes to go anywhere.”

Whether it’s lighthearted conversation in the hallway or serious introspection in the classroom, something very powerful is going on, said Domingos, the Africa University chancellor and Angolan bishop. These students are growing closer because of their different nationalities and interest in each other’s’ unique national identity.

With difference, “we have a reason for us to be together,” Domingos said. “Because if everything is the same, we don’t need to cooperate.”

There’s a metaphor in that experience for the UMC as it begins a new chapter following its ratification of regionalization.

The church has long been made up of profoundly different groups of believers, all of whom identify with the same banner of the Cross and Flame.

There have been cases like Zimbabwe, where United Methodists applied the church’s structure and beliefs to overturn political oppression and out of those ashes reimagined a faith that served the population whom it helped liberate. This reenvisioning has been happening all around and for a while, even as the U.S. church has been at the center of decision-making in the denomination.

Domingos, and many others, hope regionalization inspires those conversations about difference across regions while preserving an awareness of the collective.

“To think about regionalization, it’s important. Not for us to divide between ourselves, no,” Domingos said. “Let’s learn according to the experience of other people. How they deal with

the theology, how they deal with justice and reconciliation... it's important we know we are not all the same."

Rev. Taurai Maforo, communications director for Machinga's office, and Priscilla Muzerengwa with United Methodist Communications provided translation services for The Tennessean from Shona to English.

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