

Florida Methodists sink into the mire

by Cary McMullen via The Ledger

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The headquarters of the United Methodist Church's Florida Conference must feel as if it's sinking in the mire these days. The long-running feud in the church over the role of gays and lesbians has now devolved into a lawsuit, denials of clergy credentials, recriminations and eroding support for a plan that might have avoided this mess.

And what is happening in Florida could be what lies in the future for the United Methodist Church nationwide, some observers say. On July 14, a group of 106 Florida churches filed suit against the Florida Conference, the latest episode in a tumultuous period for United Methodists. The churches are part of a conservative movement that wants to split from the denomination, one of the two largest Protestant groups in America.

As in other mainline denominations, differences over the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ persons could not be resolved, and it reached an impasse in 2016 after a chaotic meeting of the church's General Conference, its national policy-making assembly. A plan was devised for a formal process of letting conservative churches leave the denomination with their property. (United Methodist regional conferences control decisions about a local congregation's property, so disgruntled churches can't leave the denomination without either forfeiting their buildings or jumping through a number of hoops.)

Approval of the plan has been delayed by Covid and other factors, and conservatives, tired of waiting, began to take matters into their own hands. Earlier this year, they announced the formation of a new denomination, the Global Methodist Church, which opened the door for disaffected congregations to look for ways to jump ship.

Unwilling to follow existing church rules or to wait for approval of the plan, the 106 Florida churches are seeking a judicial short cut that would allow them to separate immediately from the denomination, keep their property and ignore an obligation to pay some dues. Florida Bishop Ken Carter has called the churches hasty and asked them to abide by current procedures.

The lawsuit follows on the heels of a regrettable incident at the Florida Conference's annual meeting in June. According to a report from the United Methodist News Service, turmoil broke out near the end of the meeting when a slate of candidates for ministerial offices failed to receive the necessary three-fourths vote of approval from the clergy of the conference. Among the candidates, three were gay or lesbian and officially ineligible for ordination under existing church rules, although it is understood that those rules will be eliminated once conservative churches leave the denomination.

One of the three gay candidates, Anna Swygert, grew up in First United Methodist Church of Lakeland, where ironically the vote took place.

Conservatives criticized conference leaders for allowing the three candidates to be put forward. Others declared it a needless and unjust action by clergy who are on their way to joining the Global Methodist Church anyway. In front of the full conference, Carter addressed the candidates who were denied credentials, saying, "I would have gladly appointed you and gladly commissioned you."

In a sense, the United Methodist Church has only itself to blame for the paralysis that led to the lawsuit. Of all the Protestant denominations I have seen close up, its system of governance is by far the most tangled and convoluted. Bishops have only local administrative authority, and the unwieldy General Conference meets only once every four years.

The 106 churches listed in the suit are mostly rural or small-town churches. The financial impact on the Florida Conference of their departure likely would be significant but not catastrophic. Many of these churches are too small to have full-time pastors and are largely run by lay persons. Nevertheless, altogether they represent about 18 percent of the conference's churches. Even if the conference doesn't suffer financially, it will suffer spiritually and psychologically from the loss.

Incidentally, three of the churches are from Polk County – First United Methodist churches of Fort Meade and Frostproof and Lake Gibson United Methodist in Lakeland. Years ago, as a reporter, I had occasion to meet people in at least two of those churches. They were neither heroes nor villains but ordinary folks with traditional views.

However, their views do have consequences. Whether they intended it or not, they are now engaged in a mud wrestling match with the United Methodist Church.

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