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Bishops and budgets: Why Methodist money matters as South Carolina churches consider split



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Key Points

Churches sent \$15.8 million to the SCUMC in 2021. The state's FY23 budget is \$15.6 million.

SCUMC isn't allowing churches to leave on the same path more than 300 churches have used nationwide.

Bishop Holsten, who appoints UMC ministers, could be replaced next year.

When it comes to leaving the United Methodist Church denomination in South Carolina, there is no clear path for congregations that don't see eye to eye with church leaders.

In fact, there may be no official path at all.

The UMC Book of Discipline's Paragraph 2553, which allows churches to disaffiliate if they don't agree with the church's direction on human sexuality, applies only to congregations in South Carolina that would allow LGBTQ clergy or weddings, according to the state's UMC bishop.

And the bishop, Jonathan Holston, says there is no such UMC congregation in the state.

Breaking away: Prominent Greenville church could split from United Methodist Church over LGBTQ rights

“In South Carolina, (Bishop) Jonathan Holston has chosen to say that — because he's not violating the Book of Discipline — no one in South Carolina that's theologically conservative can choose to leave under it,” said Jay Therrell, president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

WCA was formed with a Methodist base in 2016 as the theological split over human sexuality became more apparent, Therrell said, and it was a force behind the launch of the Global Methodist Church in May.

The Book of Discipline serves as the UMC's guiding book of organization, administration and laws.

Holston, who appoints all UMC ministers for the state, has created an “untenable situation,” Therrell said.

Holston told The Greenville News he is administering Paragraph 2553 as faithfully as does other provisions in the Book of Discipline. He confirmed his stance that no church inquiring about disaffiliation “has qualified under the criteria” of 2553.

“To qualify under this provision, the members of a local church must disagree with the human sexuality language in the Discipline or how the Annual Conference has interpreted that language — and the South Carolina Conference has rigorously upheld the Discipline in these matters,” Holston said in an emailed statement.

The Book of Discipline prohibits “homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”

Holston declined to speak directly with The News on multiple occasions.

Added to the UMC's laws at a special General Conference in 2019 to address the growing divide, Paragraph 2553 shows the process for more liberal churches that want to leave UMC.

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It’s possible a more liberal interpretation of the Book of Discipline will come at the 2024 General Conference, but congregations have only until Dec. 31, 2023, to decide what they want to do.

Churches across the nation voting to disaffiliate are “overwhelming conservative,” Therrell said, but a handful of more progressive congregations have left the UMC as well.

Terrell recommends churches, no matter how their congregations feel, be as proactive as possible and let the Annual Conference — the state level of the UMC — know where they stand.

“I also encourage South Carolina churches to make it known to Bishop Holston that they are very upset,” Therrell told The News, “and to respectfully ask him to put some sort of process — a transparent process — in place as soon as possible.”

Holston did not address discrepancies between local churches' views and the General Conference's guidance on human sexuality. Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian, still serves as a bishop in the Colorado-based Mountain Sky region after her consecration in 2016.

Therrell said that if Holston will not give local churches some sort of option to disaffiliate, he is forcing lawsuits and other “secular options that no one wants to use.”

A conference at Buncombe Street UMC in Greenville has been set for October when the congregation could vote to begin the disaffiliation process.

SC UMC budget operates off requested churchgoer payments

The South Carolina UMC budget is funded largely by apportionments — the annual contribution each church sends to the state conference. The state office requests a certain amount from each congregation based on an annual, weighted calculation of certain church expenditures — clergy salaries, church operating expenses and program expenses included — and the conference’s annual budget, according to SCUMC spokesman Dan O’Mara.

The state passed a \$15,612,383 budget for fiscal year 2023 at its June conference. In 2021, SC churches contributed \$15,814,220 in apportionments.

At the June conference, South Carolina UMC voted to close five churches with a total property value of more than \$4.7 million, according to the individual county assessor’s offices. One of those properties, Cherokee Place UMC in North Charleston, was sold in early 2022 to a local nonprofit for \$2,780,000, according to Charleston County public records.

UMC properties are held in trust by the international denomination.

Paragraph 2549 of the Book of Discipline outlines what happens when a church building is no longer used for its original purpose.

Therrell does not see that as a wise option for leaving the UMC in South Carolina.

“Under that paragraph, the annual conference exercises the trust clause and they take all the church's assets,” Therrell said. “So I get very nervous about an annual conference using that paragraph... The paragraph says none of this, so it's all kind of negotiated on the side.”

In July, 106 Florida churches filed a lawsuit against their resident bishop and state conference over their exit strategy. The suit, led by Grace UMC, alleges the Florida conference has acted outside the Book of Discipline and can no longer require the "prohibitive sum of money" requested from existing churches.

More: LGBTQ marriage fight, schism leads to massive lawsuit by 106 Florida Methodist churches

The lawsuit in Florida claims the annual conference is holding between \$35 million and \$45 million in a development fund — largely supplied by the sale of former UMC churches. The use of those funds is shrouded in mystery, according to the suit.

For many South Carolina churches, the disaffiliation agreements and terms to purchase their assets back from the trust will easily be six-figure amounts, Therrell said.

UMC bishops have final say in the placement of pastors

The Annual Conference has to approve disaffiliations and their terms. Adding another layer to the confusion, the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conferences of The United Methodist Church — where bishops are appointed and assigned — is scheduled for November 2022.

Bishops — who are appointed for life and control the placement of ministers — may not have authority over the same people and places in 2023 that they do in 2022.

“The greatest source of a bishop’s power is the fact that he or she appoints where the clergy serve, and they have absolute authority over that,” Therrell said. “Pastors of the United Methodist Church serve at the pleasure of the bishop. When the bishop says, 'It's time to move here,' you do.”

In a video posted online, Chapin UMC minister Jody Flowers told his congregation in March that LGBTQ rights may be the headline, but there's much more to the separation story.

“We are at an impasse because laws that have been passed are being bypassed,” he said.

Flowers declined to speak directly with The News for this report.

He wasn't alone. Of more than a dozen United Methodist Churches in Upstate South Carolina that The News contacted — including Saint Paul and John Wesley in Greenville, Memorial in Greer, and Trinity in both Anderson and Spartanburg — only two returned calls for comment.

Pastor Valerie Mireb of Grace United Methodist Church in Pickens told The News her congregation hasn't had any formal conversations about disaffiliation.

Where do United Methodist Church members in SC go from here?

For Greenville-area churches that want to take steps toward disaffiliation, the first step is voting to have a special conference with district superintendent Rev. Jim Dennis.

At that meeting, the congregation can take a vote on leaving the United Methodist Church.

UMC authorities and board members have to approve the terms and conditions of any church's split from the denomination. That includes what happens to the UMC-owned buildings and apportionment.

The South Carolina Annual UMC Conference is set for June 2023, and a vote to allow churches to disaffiliate would take place then.

Paragraph 2553 — which Holston said does not apply to South Carolina — gives churches the right to retain their property and requires two years of apportionments. The annual conference can also apply other "standard terms" to the disaffiliation agreements.

However, without a specific protocol set in place by the General Conference, there is no legislation within the church outlining exactly who can vote or the formal disaffiliation timeline.

Several protocols emerged after the 2019 General Conference, the most widely supported of which is Reconciliation through Grace and Separation. This proposed legislation calls for an amicable separation that "will continue the rich heritage of the Methodist movement."

By the time it has a chance to be passed into UMC legislation in 2024, it will be four years old and well past the deadline for churches to have begun the disaffiliation process.

No churches in South Carolina have voted locally to begin the disaffiliation process, according to O'Mara.

A grassroots organization of church members has begun a campaign to educate congregations across the state on the options — or lack thereof — for disaffiliation.

Story continues below.

"SC Traditional United Methodist Lay Leadership Group" is proactively reaching out to congregations to provide a forum for education and resources surrounding the theological and doctrinal issues of the UMC divide.

Greenville District Superintendent Rev. Jim Dennis, who has met with multiple Upstate churches to discuss disaffiliation, said having to wait in a state of uncertainty for the 2024 meeting is disappointing for all. He said remaining patient and continuing the church's mission of making disciples is key.

"I join Bishop Holston in asking all United Methodists in the Greenville District and across the South Carolina Conference to pray with persistence for God's church, its leaders and its members, and to serve the Lord faithfully with all your heart," Dennis said.

– Caitlin Herrington, local reporter and lover of alliteration, covers government and growth in the Golden Strip. Get in touch with her at cherrington@greenvillenews.com and follow her on Twitter and Instagram @GVLnewsCat.