

# THE TENNESSEAN

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## RELIGION

# What a recent decision by United Methodists in Africa could mean for the worldwide church



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## Key Points

As United Methodist Church splinters with traditionalists leaving breakaway denomination, questions remain about churches outside U.S. Many expected African churches to be among those which leave.

Group of UMC bishops in Africa expressed support for staying in UMC in statement in September.

At forum in early January, majority of United Methodist delegates to UMC General Conference from Africa approve resolutions expressing desire to stay in denomination.

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A majority of United Methodist Church delegates from Africa are opposing leaving the denomination and instead supporting a legislative alternative at the upcoming UMC General Conference in a proposal that could shape the worldwide church.

The delegates gathered on Jan. 4-7 in Tanzania for a first-of-its-kind forum in which resolutions against disaffiliation — or the process that congregations exit the UMC — and regionalization, a legislative proposal for the UMC General Conference, overwhelmingly passed.

The forum in Tanzania doesn't seal the deal for the future of United Methodists in Africa, but it's another major step following a statement by a group of 11 African bishops expressing similar intentions. Though many expected the largely conservative base of United Methodists in Africa to leave the denomination in the early years of the UMC's splintering, those predictions have shifted in the past year.

More than 7,500 U.S.-based churches have disaffiliated from the largely Nashville-based UMC between 2019-2023 as part of the splintering over disagreements about theology and

church policy, including dealing with LGBTQ rights. Other churches outside the U.S. have joined the more conservative breakaway denomination, called the Global Methodist Church, but UMC policy restrictions officially do not allow churches outside the U.S. to disaffiliate.

“During this pivotal gathering, delegates stood united against disaffiliation, solidifying their commitment to the Church's unity,” the Rev. Gabriel Banga Mususwa, general secretary of the United Methodist African Forum, which is the group that organized the Tanzania gathering, said in a statement. “Delegates urge all United Methodists in Africa to reject divisive rhetoric and misinformation, fostering communication within the connectional Church.”

The United Methodist African Forum is an advocacy group that has promoted United Methodist unity across the continent. A similar group on the other side of the debate, called the UMC Africa Initiative, has emphasized in recent months there are still many United Methodists in Africa who want to leave the denomination.

“African bishops supporting regionalization seem ready to betray the doctrinal integrity of the UM Church in Africa,” the Rev. Jerry Kulah, general coordinator of the UMC Africa Initiative, said in a November post responding to the anti-disaffiliation statement by 11 African bishops. “However, the Africa Initiative stands with a majority of African United Methodists and delegates to make it clear that regionalization is not an option for the UMC in Africa.”

**Explainer:** Splinter explainer: Will UMC churches outside the U.S. stay or go from the denomination?

Regionalization, one of many proposals the UMC General Conference will deliberate at its gathering in April in Charlotte, would give United Methodist regional authorities outside the U.S. more autonomy. As a result, those regional authorities could maintain stricter policies on LGBTQ ordination, for example, even as that policy landscape in the U.S. shifts.

In fact, delegates at the recent forum in Tanzania approved a “Revised Social Principles” resolution to “recognize marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant between a man and a woman.” That resolution and others are declarations of how the 190 delegates who attended the Tanzania event intend to vote at the UMC General Conference in April.

A total of 278 delegates from Africa will attend the UMC General Conference, representing 32% of the 862 total delegates. Total UMC membership outside the U.S. — throughout Africa, in the Philippines, South Korea, and parts of Europe — was 7 million, outnumbering the 6

million American members in 2021, according to the latest data from the UMC General Council on Finance and Administration. Of any single region, United Methodists in Africa represent the largest share of UMC members.

Proposed legislation for the UMC General Conference will be available later this month.

**Recap of last year:** The most consequential year in UMC split leaves uncertainty, new horizons. Here's how

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