

# UMAction

## Briefing



## One-Quarter of United Methodist Churches Exit

The mass exodus of traditional churches from United Methodism has dramatically exceeded expectations.

In 2022, liberal leaders cynically abandoned their previous promises to support a more amicable division through the “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation,” self-servingly hoping to keep a larger share of people, congregations, and assets for themselves. So we at IRD/UMAction set an ambitious goal of getting 5,000 of the denomination’s roughly 30,000 U.S. congregations to disaffiliate by the conclusion of 2023.

**More than 7,662 U.S. congregations have disaffiliated from the UMC, about 25 percent of all American United Methodist congregations.**

Liberal megachurch pastor and caucus leader **Adam Hamilton** predicted in May 2023 that after the liberal hostile takeover, the redefined UMC “looks like it will retain about 85% of its churches in the U.S., and 75 of its 100 largest churches.” A departure of 15 percent of 30,000 congregations would be 4,500 disaffiliations.

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As for the UMC’s largest congregations, the denomination’s General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) produced a list of the top-100 largest-membership United Methodist congregations in America, based on statistics for 2020. Of these 100 largest congregations, 31 have disaffiliated. Another four had

their disaffiliations at least partially blocked by heavy-handed conferences leaders, only to have devastatingly large numbers of individual members leave without their building, as is happening in other congregations across the country. So the UMC split cost the denomination about one third of its largest congregations.

The main vehicle for the United Methodist Church’s schism became Paragraph 2553, the new provision adopted by the 2019 General Conference allowing congregations to leave the United Methodist Church with their properties. This provision included an explicit sunset clause, so that it expires with the end of 2023.

We lament the unfaithfulness and dysfunction that has now completely taken over our United Methodist Church, redefining the denomination

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## Christmas 2023

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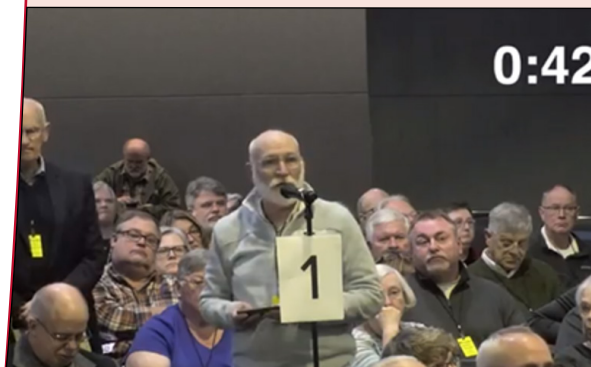
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The Rev. Stephen Coburn speaks in favor of blocking ratification of Jonesboro First UMC’s disaffiliation in November 2022. Such efforts by Stay UMC activists have injected a new level of contentiousness into United Methodism’s season of separation. See “HELP NEEDED!” on page 3. (Photo: Arkansas Annual Conference livestream)

# ‘Stay UMC’ Activists Win Empty Victories

The UMC’s supreme court, the Judicial Council, effectively amended Paragraph 2553, the church law allowing congregations to disaffiliate and keep their properties, by requiring every congregational disaffiliation to be approved by majority vote of its annual conference.

More than 99 percent of the time, annual conferences have voted to grant such permission.

Unfortunately, in several instances liberal, institutionalist “Stay UMC” activists campaigned to block certain disaffiliations at this final stage of annual conference approval, even after

The Arkansas Conference’s November 2022 vote to deny Jonesboro First UMC’s disaffiliation (after a particularly nasty blockade campaign) resulted in a draining legal battle that continues more than a year later. Even if the “Stay UMC” side ultimately wins the lawsuit, it will win for itself nearly \$5 million in building debt.

The blockade of another Arkansas congregation, Searcy First UMC, resulted in a lawsuit that was settled seven months later. While the settlement details are confidential, the basic result was the same as if the conference had simply approved the disaffiliation, except that conference staff and congregational leaders had their money, time, and emotional energy sapped by months of legal struggle.

The blockade of a third Arkansas congregation, Cabot UMC, provoked most staff and leaders to relaunch as a new congregation, with slightly *higher* reported attendance than the unified congregation had had in 2021. While a more liberal “Stay UMC” faction remained in what had been an indebted building, a local newspaper reported that after the congregation split, noticeably fewer people remained with the building, and that

*“[T]he choir loft was empty; most of its members have resigned. Nor was there a need to fire up the organ; the organist no longer worships there. With no one left to run the sound system, the microphones didn’t always work.”*

Within 11 hours of the North Georgia Conference vote to block disaffiliation of McEachern UMC, distressed conservative church members organized a new church service the next morning. The picture at left shows

the sparsely populated pews containing those who remained in the building, while the picture below shows the much larger group of McEachern members who packed a funeral home across the street, both on the same morning.

Bishops **Sue Hauptert-Johnson**, **Gary Mueller**, and **Robert Dease** could have pro-actively led the Virginia, Arkansas, and North Georgia Conferences, respectively, in ways that fostered more win-win ways forward. Their choices to instead hamper Christian ministry outside of the UMC proved to be extremely short-sighted. ❌

**ACTION: Pray for bishops and other United Methodist leaders to have a more gracious attitude towards those seeking disaffiliation in 2024 or beyond.**

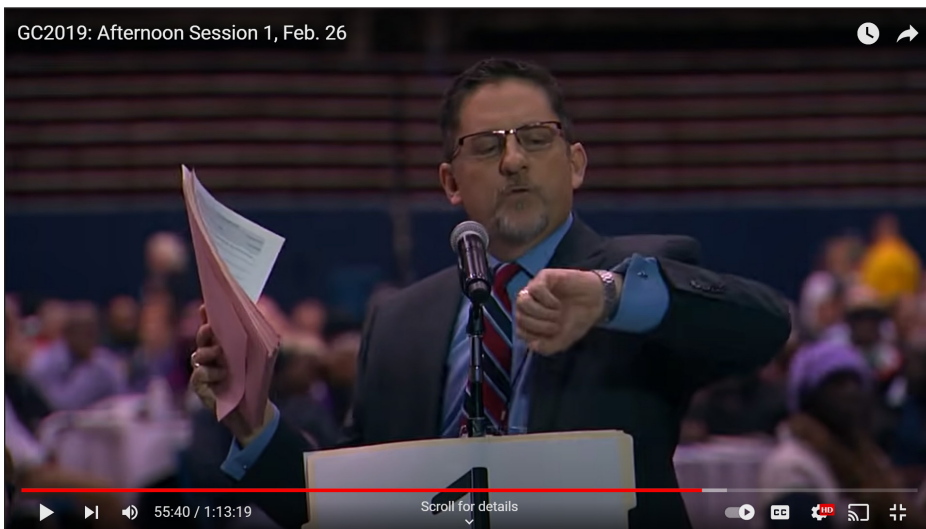


One day following rejection of their disaffiliation vote by the North Georgia Annual Conference, McEachern Memorial United Methodist Church members organized across the street, leaving only a handful in the old church building. (Photo: McEachern Methodist Church)

these congregations completed everything asked of them. These targeted congregations generally have valuable property, which greedy conference officials hoped to seize from the majority of congregants.

But even when these campaigns persuaded a majority of annual conference voters to block particular congregations, the victories they won were hollow.

In Virginia, such a blockade of New Town UMC’s disaffiliation resulted in the pastor and most of its people walking away to re-launch as a new, growing Global Methodist congregation, with their old building soon closing as a place of worship. By blocking this disaffiliation, the annual conference was stuck with \$1.1 million in building debt instead of receiving the \$562,000 the congregation was prepared to pay in exit fees.



The Rev. Mark Holland, executive director of Mainstream UMC and contributor to *UM Insight*, vowing to filibuster 2019 General Conference business “until the monster trucks roll in” for the next event. (Photo: YouTube screen capture)

## HELP NEEDED! Powerful Bishops, Caucus Leaders Campaign to Trap Churches in UMC

**D**espite more than 7,662 church exits, many others remain forcibly trapped in an increasingly hostile, dysfunctional, and ideologically radicalizing UMC.

The main vehicle for separation, Paragraph 2553, gave congregations “a limited right” to disaffiliate and keep their properties, expiring at the end of 2023. Yet for a great many United Methodists, this exit ramp was never an option. Council of Bishops President **Thomas Bickerton** dramatically overstepped his authority by declaring that this paragraph could only be used by the minority of the global denomination who live in the United States. Within America, only a half dozen conferences have established clear policies to allow congregations to disaffiliate after 2023, while others imposed extreme financial and other barriers that made disaffiliation impossible for most congregations. For example, one conservative congregation reported that with all of the additional fees demanded by its California-Pacific Conference, disaffiliating would cost them \$60,000 *per member* “an amount they could neither raise nor borrow.”

Across the denomination, bishops and other denominational officials have claimed there is “no need to rush” to disaffiliate before the 2023 expiration of Paragraph 2553, using their access to congregations to urge waiting to see what happens at the UMC’s spring 2024 General Conference in Charlotte, NC.

Knowing all of this, powerful political forces now cynically attempt to block future separation opportunities for non-liberal United Methodists, even after General Conference takes widely expected actions to redefine the UMC to become more liberal on marriage, abortion, and other issues.

At the November Council of Bishops meeting, Bickerton, whose own New York Annual conference only allowed six congregations to disaffiliate, declared, “We cannot afford to walk

into Charlotte continuing to talk about disaffiliation and separation.” At an October conference, leaders of the North Central Jurisdiction encouraged that region’s delegates to oppose allowing disaffiliations in Africa. Meanwhile, the liberal “Mainstream UMC” caucus has recently lobbied General Conference delegates to block future separation options for even those congregations who have never had any. In its lobbying, Mainstream UMC has singled out IRD/UMAction as a primary barrier to this agenda.

The Africa Initiative, a representative caucus of United Methodist leaders from across Sub-Saharan Africa, has submitted two important petitions. One would extend the basic terms of Paragraph 2553 for another few years, with the important changes of making clear that this option to disaffiliate applies to *all* United Methodist congregations around the world (not just Americans) and that conference leaders cannot impose draconian additional financial barriers to disaffiliation. Another petition would establish a new, streamlined process for entire annual conferences outside of America to transfer into the Global Methodist Church or “another Wesleyan denomination” within a relatively short timeframe and with minimal red tape.

Adopting the Africa Initiative petitions would allow the UMC’s theologically liberal and conservative factions to both move forward into their preferred futures, without being held back by conflict with each other, sooner rather than later. 🌱

**ACTION:** *If you are still United Methodist, urge your annual conference’s delegates to support the two Africa Initiative petitions to (1) have a fair, consistent disaffiliation process for congregations in all annual conferences around the world, and (2) allow a streamlined process to give non-U.S. annual conferences the option to leave.*

# Global Methodists Do Annual Conference Differently

**W**e at UMAction have now had the privilege of reporting first-hand on several convening sessions of the Global Methodist Church. This new denomination was formed by evangelical United Methodist leaders—with the initial encouragement of top liberal leader—to continue faithfulness to historic, biblical Methodist values and the best of our tradition while moving beyond the unhealthy habits that have hampered our mission.

We have consistently observed a radically different atmosphere at GMC conferences than at most United Methodist annual conference sessions. A deeper feeling of trust, camaraderie, and mutual support among participating pastors and laypeople, as well as clear agreement on basic doctrine and an absence of divisive debates, unbiblical agendas, and factional divisions, permeates the gatherings. The plenary and break-out sessions have actually been encouraging and helpful for ministry.

Those overseeing new Global Methodist conferences have been proactive in honestly addressing the many challenges they face, including the importance of healing from the wounds many carry from their challenging journeys out of the UMC.

The GMC is moving forward in making new disciples and planting new churches. In October, its Allegheny West Provisional Annual Conference (Ohio plus western Pennsylvania) ordained some 149 pastors, what was reportedly the largest group of Methodist ministers ever ordained together in North America, and perhaps the world (including some former United Methodist clergy who were changing their clergy categories).

At that meeting, the Rev. Dr. **Jessica LaGrone**, Asbury Theological Seminary’s Dean of the Chapel, conceded that not everyone would want what the GMC offers. But for those who do, she enthused, “Welcome to the Global Methodist Church, where:

- “Annual conferences look less like rules and reports, and more like holy conferencing and prayer and renewal;
- “Bishops contend for integrity and faithfulness;
- “Pastors can move on from a congregation, trusting their denominational system to ensure both that their successor in their former congregation will build on the same biblical theological foundation, and that their new church will have already had the same faithful foundation laid; [and]

- “Small- and medium-sized congregations enjoy similar privileges to those long enjoyed by large United Methodist congregations of having greater input in the selection of their pastors.” ✝

**ACTION:** To learn more about the Global Methodist Church, go to [globalmethodist.org](http://globalmethodist.org)



The Rev. Dr. Jessica LaGrone preaches at the inaugural session of the Global Methodist Church’s Allegheny West Provisional Annual Conference. (Photo: Global Methodist Church)

## One-Quarter of United Methodist Churches Exit

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into something radically different from the UMC we previously knew. We lament the many in the U.S. and especially beyond the U.S. who remain heavy-handedly coerced against their wills into remaining in an increasingly hostile denomination (See “HELP NEEDED!” on page 3).

But we rejoice at the many who are finding freedom, after so many decades of problems in the UMC, to step forward into a new day of faithfulness and a renewed focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ. We especially celebrate the great work God is doing through more and more disaffiliated United Methodists who are sticking together in the rapidly growing Global Methodist Church. ✝

# United Methodism Soft on Hamas, Hard on Israel

The October 7 attacks against Israelis by the Islamist terrorist group Hamas marked the greatest mass murder of Jews on any single day since the Holocaust.

Yet some public reactions by top UMC denominational officials were shamefully morally muddled. A joint statement from the UMC's General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), the World Methodist Council, and Methodist Church in Britain awkwardly avoided directly naming Hamas, and broadly lamented "the escalation of violence" while even-handedly "call[ing] on both sides not to resort to further violence." Since this statement was issued within a day of the attacks, before Israel had much opportunity to militarily respond, this was effectively a call to let Hamas get away with mass murder. Similarly, some bishops' pronouncement carefully showed even-handedness in lamenting both Hamas's indiscriminately killing civilians and Israel's military response to the designated terrorist group. The liberal

caucus group, United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR), briefly deplored Hamas's "targeting of unarmed Israeli civilians," but also launched a campaign to protest U.S. military aid to Israel and actually claimed that Hamas's October 7 attacks—which involved raping women, kidnapping children, and slaughtering babies and elderly Holocaust survivors—"cannot be depicted truthfully as 'unprovoked.'"

This follows a long history of UMC officials singling out the world's lone Jewish state for a special level of hostility while refusing to criticize Hamas and Islamist regimes. The UMC's 2008 General Conference adopted a resolution strongly criticizing Israel while rejecting multiple resolutions that would have also criticized Hamas. Delegates in 2012 gutted a resolution defending Israel's right to exist and decrying violence in the conflict by

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## Support New Methodist Church Plant in DC!

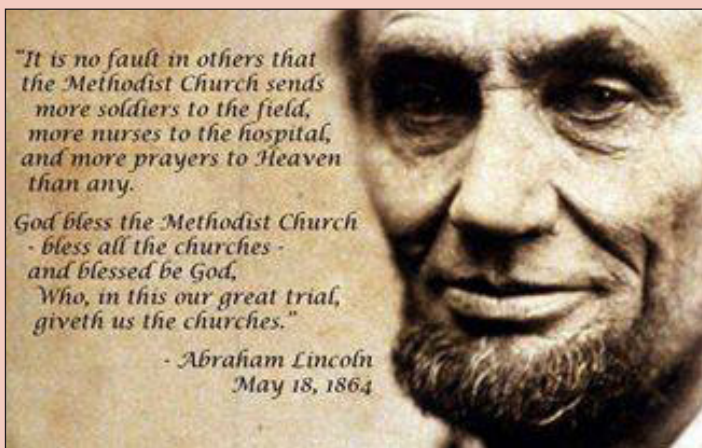
The geographic spread of American congregations who have disaffiliated from the UMC and joined the conservative new Global Methodist Church largely reflects how conservative United Methodist congregations have long been disproportionately located in rural areas, small towns, and exurban regions.

This presents major limitations for reaching the U.S. mission field. The United States Census Bureau reports that some 80 percent of the U.S. population lives in urban areas. Young people who grow up in rural, conservative Methodist congregations go to college and then move to metropolitan areas (which provide more job opportunities) often find no healthy, biblically faithful Methodist church options. Many major American cities currently lack a single Global Methodist congregation.

One such city is Washington, D.C. Other denominational traditions have shown that they can successfully plant thriving congregations filled with young adults while remaining firmly committed to biblical values, even in culturally liberal major cities. Why not Global Methodism?

The UMC split presents exciting new opportunities for church planting. By its unique nature as America's capital, Washington continually sees new residents arriving from across America as well as around the world.

We at IRD/UMAction are seeking to raise \$200,000 to plant a faithful new Methodist congregation in the most powerful city in the world, in collaboration with the Global Methodist Church and Asbury Theological Seminary. One of the biggest challenges to urban church planting—finding available and affordable meeting space—has already been met by IRD's offering use of the chapel in our strategically located downtown office. Trained church planters are eager to work in the great harvest, but they need us to support them with the resources to plant faithful new congregations. ✝



**ACTION:** Please donate, individually and/or through your congregation or Sunday school class, to a new Methodist Church in D.C., designating your donation for "New DC Methodist Church." Or give online at: [TheIRD.org/donate](http://TheIRD.org/donate)



Israeli President Isaac Herzog with family members of Israelis taken hostage by the terrorist group Hamas. Recent statements by United Methodist leaders on Middle East unrest has seemed confused about the victims and perpetrators. (Photo: Kobi Gideon / GPO / Spokesperson unit of the President of Israel / Wikimedia Commons)

## United Methodism Soft on Hamas, Hard on Israel

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removing specific criticisms of Hamas. But even this watered-down statement was apparently insufficiently anti-Israel for many United Methodist leaders, as 26 percent of committee delegates voted against the amended resolution. In 2014, the GBGM sponsored and the UMC's apportionment-funded D.C. political lobby office, the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) heavily promoted, an anti-Israel conference at "centrist" liberal United Methodist leader **Mike Slaughter's** church. Official speakers mockingly dismissed Israeli security concerns, stooped to anti-Semitic allegations about Jewish greed and a Jewish conspiracy controlling the U.S. federal government, promoting collectively punishing Israelis with boycotts, sanctions, and divestment, and repeatedly declined direct opportunities to criticize Hamas. In 2015, **Janet Lahr Lewis**, an official of both the GBCS and GBGM, called for boycotting the Holocaust Museum in D.C., for the sake of Palestinians and others.

At the 2016 General Conference, Bishop **Minerva Carcaño** heavy-handedly intervened and former GBGM missionary **Sandra Olewine** blatantly misrepresented the truth to kill a resolution denouncing anti-Semitism. Opposition centered on how one section acknowledged both that the fallible Israeli government sometimes deserves criticism and that *some* criticisms of the Jewish state *do* cross the line into anti-Semitism.

Majorities at that General Conference voted to reject anti-Israel divestment and rebuke the GBGM and GBCS's support of the extremist U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. But this brought little to no shift in the UMC bureaucracy's anti-Israel biases and obsessions.

Now the denominational split is removing from the UMC most of those who would restrain such anti-Israel tendencies. Remaining United Methodist leaders can expect growing pressure to be more outspoken in anti-Israel political activism while continuing to ignore or downplay Hamas's evils. ❄️

# UMAction Briefing

*A newsletter for United Methodists seeking a biblically faithful and evangelistically fruitful future for our congregations*

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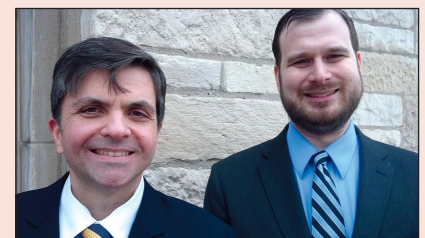
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