

UMAction

Briefing



How Big Is the United Methodist Split So Far?

Per sociology professor **Ryan Burge**, the United Methodist Church’s fracturing “can only be described as the largest denominational schism in the last fifty years.”

The 2019 General Conference enacted Paragraph 2553, offering American congregations “a limited right” to disaffiliate and keep their properties by 2023.

This involves significant hurdles, including denominational officials actively discouraging disaffiliation. Yet as of this writing, over 6,200 U.S. congregation have overcome these barriers. That’s over 20 percent of U.S. congregations.

It is the equivalent of all congregations in 22 smaller annual conferences leaving. The largest-membership and previously fastest-growing congregations are disaffiliating at *higher* rates.

In this same period, another five percent of American United Methodist congregations permanently closed.

This loss of over 25 percent of congregations *so far* does not count the large exodus of conservative members leaving their church buildings individually or in large, organized groups, sometimes including the majority of their former congregations.

Furthermore, the split is ongoing! Many annual conferences have scheduled special sessions to approve additional disaffiliations before the end of the year. A few have established local policies to let congregations leave later. And a new wave of departures is anticipated when the spring 2024 General Conference officially liberalizes the UMC’s standards on sexuality and other issues, as is widely expected.

When adjusted for inflation, the official denomination-wide budget proposed to this General Conference represents a reduction of over 50 percent!

Overseas, every United Methodist congregation in Bulgaria, Estonia, and Slovakia has left, while the five annual conferences in Russia, Central Asia, and the Czech Republic have begun multi-year processes to leave. In Africa and the Philippines, some have already broken away to form Global Methodist congregations, while many more are expected to do so after the 2024 General Conference.

As of this writing, the Global Methodist Church, the new denomination for theologically orthodox United Methodists, has grown to 3,800

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Fall 2023

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The largest-membership and previously fastest-growing congregations are disaffiliating at higher rates.



Africans Prepare to Leave the UMC

The liberal American “Mainstream UMC” caucus recently warned its supporters “to be prepared to live with” the probability that the UMC’s embrace of LGBTQ+ liberationist ideology may drive away Africans and Filipinos *en masse*, since “they are much more traditional than even the US traditionalists.”

In early September, UMAction Director **John Lomperis** attended a meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, of dozens of leaders from



Clergy and lay leaders in Kenya announced that 58 local churches voted to separate from The United Methodist Church and join the Global Methodist Church at an annual conference gathering on August 24, 2023. (Photo courtesy of the Global Methodist Church)

United Methodism in all major regions of Africa. These leaders agreed they did not want to remain a part of the UMC after it officially liberalizes on marriage. They also firmly opposed so-called “global segregation” proposals to establish one set of moral standards for the UMC in America and contrary standards in Africa. As the Rev. Dr. **Jerry Kulah** said in a statement issued on behalf of the leadership of the Africa Initiative, such regionalization proposals are “aimed at silencing the voice of the church in Africa” and would effectively “compartmentalize sin within the UMC and make the African church complicit in allowing the U.S. church to adopt unscriptural teachings and standards.”

Some African United Methodists have already begun leaving for Global Methodism. There are now at least 160 Global Methodist congregations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Kenya, where Bishop Wandabula’s friendliness with the LGBTQ-affirming “Reconciling” movement provoked local outrage (see “How ALL United Methodist Bishops Fail the *Discipline*,” page 5), 58 out of 98 United Methodist congregations recently left for the GMC, with more expected to follow.

Most Africans, however, are waiting for 2024. West Africans are hoping to move as a bloc. Elsewhere, the situation is more complicated. While African church members are overwhelmingly orthodox, several African bishops are aligned with

U.S. liberals, on whom they are extraordinarily financially dependent. To varying degrees, such bishops, following old colonialist models, have served their white, Western sponsors by heavy-handedly suppressing African United Methodists’ free speech and attempts to organize in ways that authentically represent the people’s values.

Council of Bishops President **Thomas Bickerton** of New York exceeded his authority by dubiously declaring that non-U.S. congregations may not use Paragraph 2553 to disaffiliate before it expires this year. The *Discipline*’s only current provision allowing non-Americans to leave the UMC is an extraordinarily complicated, multi-year process, requiring several layers of approval, that only applies to an entire annual conference desiring to become an autonomous, regionally limited denomination.

So the Africa Initiative has submitted two petitions to the 2024 General Conference. One would re-adopt a new version of Paragraph 2553 that would explicitly give *all* congregations around the world one last chance to disaffiliate, while preventing the imposition of additional, prohibitive financial penalties. The second petition would establish a streamlined process for non-U.S. annual conferences to transfer into another denomination, within a relatively short timeframe and with minimal red tape.

One key African United Methodist leader at the Nairobi meeting stressed how for many Africans, leaving the UMC will

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UMAction Director John Lomperis shares statistics on United Methodist Church decline in the United States during the Africa Initiative Summit in Nairobi, Kenya.

United Methodists, Global Methodists Split on Nicene Creed

The United Methodist Church is splitting between the Global Methodist Church (GMC), which is committed to the historic Christian faith of the fourth-century Nicene Creed, and the increasingly liberal post-separation United Methodist Church (psUMC), which is not.

From the beginning, the Nicene Creed has been part of the GMC's official doctrine. The GMC website explains that while it is committed to Scripture as its primary doctrinal and moral authority, the denomination also recognizes that it "stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before us in the faith" and so "honor[s] them by remaining committed to, preserving, and continuing this heritage of faith they delivered to us."

In contrast, while the Nicene Creed is used in worship in some United Methodist congregations, it has no official role in the UMC, and is not even explicitly mentioned in the UMC *Discipline*. Delegates at the 2016 General Conference overwhelmingly *rejected* proposals to include the Nicene Creed in the official United Methodist Doctrinal Standards.

This reflects deeper differences.

In many places, the UMC has not been simply neutral on the Nicene Creed, but overtly hostile to its doctrines. A 1965 survey of American Methodist clergy found only minorities believing in the miracles of Jesus Christ's virginal birth or physical resurrection and only 52 percent believing "in a divine judgment after death." A 2018 survey by United Methodist Communications of American United

Methodist lay people found 38 percent believing, like Bishop **Karen Oliveto**, that "Jesus committed sins like other people." So many orthodox believers have since left, that that may now be the majority view!

Generations of United Methodist ministers have been shaped by the widespread mantra that United Methodism "is not a creedal church." This slogan is used to shrug off concerns about denominational officials denying core biblical doctrines.

United Methodist officials have generally cared little about the theology taught in local churches, as long as they pay their apportionments, avoid disruption, and do not decline too quickly.

The UMC simply has no clear, effective doctrinal boundaries. Those who tried insisting otherwise, at least for denominational leaders, have left or are leaving the UMC.

In contrast, in the GMC, all ministers are expected to affirm a core of minimal

biblical doctrine and all congregations are expected to teach it. So when you meet a Global Methodist minister, you can be reasonably confident that this person is committed to the denomination's official doctrine, including the basic ecumenical doctrines that have united Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and historic Protestant churches for many centuries. Unlike the UMC, when you visit any Global Methodist congregation, you can immediately know what beliefs it promotes. ✚



United Methodists depart from Nicene Creed, Global Methodists return to it. (Picture of Council of Nicea from Wikimedia Commons, Fresco in Capella Sistina, Vatican)

Africans Prepare to Leave the UMC

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not be as easy as some make it out to be, and said that these petitions could greatly help Africans. He told UMAction that just as African General Conference delegates helped American conservatives at the 2019 General Conference, especially in adopting Paragraph 2553 (which has exclusively benefitted Americans), American conservatives should return the favor by helping Africans pass these two petitions. ✚

ACTION: *If you are still United Methodist, write to your annual conference's delegates to urge them to support the two Africa Initiative petitions to allow disaffiliation for congregations around the world and to allow a streamlined process for non-U.S. annual conferences to leave. Remember that most remaining U.S. delegates are liberal. This is a matter of Golden-Rule fairness and letting non-Americans make their own choices, rather than trying to control them in neo-colonialist ways. Email JLOMPERIS@THEIRD.ORG with "WHO ARE MY DELEGATES?" as your Subject line, telling us your annual conference.*

Even in the South, the UMC Has Been Taken Over

American United Methodism used to be characterized by stark regional differences in theology. The U.S. South was a stalwart of theologically conservative leadership.

But now there is more denominational uniformity, as the liberalism of the UMC's Western Jurisdiction has achieved a hostile takeover across the country, even in the South.

In November, all five U.S. jurisdictions, including the Southeastern and South Central Jurisdictions, adopted resolutions deriding the UMC's gay-marriage bans as "harmful," pressuring leaders against enforcement, and expressing their desire for LGBTQIA+ bishops, clergy, and other denominational leaders.

In the two Southern jurisdictions, supremely qualified, officially endorsed Hispanic candidates found they had no chance of being elected bishop because they believe marriage is a union of one man and one woman.

As of this writing, over 28 percent of each Southern jurisdictions' congregations have disaffiliated, as part of the mass exodus of conservatives as well as moderates, with more on the way.

Some Southern annual conferences already witnessed a liberal takeover in 2019 voting on resolutions and delegate elections. Others saw new liberal majorities in this year's voting on such matters, after mass disaffiliations.

Even Southern United Methodists now embrace gender-bending extremism. The North Texas Conference, through a section of its official website and an overwhelmingly adopted 2022 resolution, promotes the cause of transgenderism among vulnerable children and youth. The North Carolina Conference had the Rev. **Sarah Majors**, who uses "she" and "they" pronouns, serve as spiritual leader for a major youth retreat *after* her congregation hosted "a family friendly drag show." The North Alabama and North Georgia Conferences now each have a transgender activist elder, with a guaranteed appointment to potentially any congregation in their conferences.

Bishop **Leonard Fairley**, now of Kentucky, has been one of the relatively fair-minded bishops in treatment of non-liberals. But after one of his congregations received ridiculous external criticism for *failing to display gay-pride flags*, Fairley and other North Carolina Conference officials undermined this congregation by issuing a groveling apology letter, confessing that they had somehow caused "harm" by supporting a new church



Official photo from the UMC's North Carolina Conference of its 2023 ordination service, at which Bishops Hope Morgan Ward and Connie Shelton ordained Charles Daly, who is in a same-gender civil marriage, on June 17, 2023. (Photo: North Carolina Conference UMC)

start that "was not fully affirming of the LGBTQIA+ community and inclusive of marriage equality."

Our website has documented recent instances in Arkansas, Missouri, North Georgia, North Texas, Oklahoma, and Virginia of clergy violating the ban on performing same-sex weddings and/or congregations defying the ban on hosting such ceremonies, with no evident accountability.

In June, the North Carolina Conference publicly celebrated their "historic vote" in knowingly ordaining "a first-ever candidate in a same-gender civil marriage," **Charles Daly**, in defiance of the *Discipline*. That same month, the Florida Conference similarly approved two LGBTQ activist clergy candidates who were denied last year. Last year, the North Texas Conference ordained **Roy Atwood** despite his previous public admission of living in a same-sex partnership. In New Mexico, local pastor **Ashley Valenzuela** publicly touts her same-sex marriage.

Southern United Methodism used to be a place where even liberal leaders had enough integrity and respect for others to play by the rules. Now even without the *Discipline* having been changed, and even with on-paper accountability standards strengthened by the last General Conference, the UMC already allows its ministers to have same-sex partners and officiate gay weddings. Even in the South. 🚩

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congregations, with more added weekly. The GMC is now operating or organizing in all 50 states, as well as in Africa, Europe, Canada, the Middle East, and the Philippines. It is already larger than the majority of World Methodist Council denominations. 🚩

ACTION: To learn more about the Global Methodist Church and where it has organized conferences, visit www.globalmethodist.org. If your whole congregation is unwilling to separate from the UMC's liberalism but other members are, you can find guidance on forming a new Global Methodist congregation, even if you do not immediately have a pastor, from the River Network: <https://www.therivernetwork.org/>

How ALL United Methodist Bishops Fail the *Discipline*

The United Methodist Church's slow-motion schism has been largely driven by the hypocrisy of the clear biblical and moral standards in the denomination's supposedly governing *Book of Discipline* being openly disregarded by the highest levels of leadership.

One persistent myth is that several active U.S. bishops are still working to "guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the church" (*Discipline* ¶403.1).



On November 5, 2022, at Christ UMC in Salt Lake City, multiple United Methodist bishops openly defied the *Discipline* by consecrating openly partnered gay activist Cedric Bridgeforth to become a new United Methodist bishop. (Photo: Patrick Scriven for the Western Jurisdictional Conference)

Only a shrinking minority of U.S. bishops still uphold the *Discipline's* bans on gay weddings and non-celibate gay clergy. But even these bishops have failed to uphold the *Discipline* in three crucial areas: "Reconciling congregations," defending core doctrine, and holding fellow bishops accountable.

First of all, since 1999, the church law bishops are obligated to uphold has included Judicial Council Decision #871. That ruling forbids congregations from formally affiliating with unofficial caucus movements, including the LGBTQ+ liberationist Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN).

RMN has notoriously pursued an "any means necessary" ethos, disrupting meetings, encouraging clergy to violate the *Discipline*, and intimidating UMC leaders who want to bring accountability.

And yet we know of only four bishops who have ever lifted a finger to enforce this part of church law. Only one, **Jonathan Holston** of South Carolina, remains an active United Methodist bishop.

After it became illegal for United Methodist congregations to publicly declare themselves RMN-affiliated "Reconciling congregations," the number of congregations doing so increased dramatically.

Even in Sub-Saharan Africa, Bishop **Daniel Wandabula** drew headlines last year by prominently honoring one of his two Reconciling congregations in Kenya, participating in a dedication service for its new sanctuary along with some of his district superintendents and three nationally prominent American RMN leaders.

And so, with the support or acquiescence of United Methodist bishops, this movement has steadily grown, to the point that it has now effectively taken over the whole denomination.

Secondly, bishops have fundamentally failed to defend the UMC's essential doctrine. The *Discipline* includes core Doctrinal Standards, affirming historic Methodist orthodoxy on basic matters like the authority of Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ. Yet these doctrines have been widely neglected.

Every active United Methodist bishop in America oversees an area where a culture of theological anarchy has become well established. Clergy can and do publicly *discourage* belief in core doctrines of the UMC Doctrinal Standards, with no accountability.

We at UMAction have documented numerous instances of United Methodist agencies and seminaries promoting such blatant heresies as denying Jesus Christ's sinlessness or trivializing His divinity. Yet even relatively conservative United Methodist bishops have not dared challenge these institutions' unfaithfulness—even while these bishops demand congregations pay

apportionments to prop them up.

Thirdly, bishops have a moral and spiritual obligation to hold each other accountable. Officially, the UMC is not structured as a regional confederacy but as a *connectional* denomination, where each bishop is "a bishop of the whole church." On paper, United Methodist bishops in every region are given the same basic job description, are subject to the same core standards of accountability, and are paid from a common fund.

As with Paul's warning that a little yeast of unfaithfulness can leaven the whole batch of dough, unfaithfulness in any part of the UMC, if not challenged, will eventually spread throughout the denomination.

Yet even extreme heretical teachings and blatant rule breaking by liberal bishops has been met with deafening silence from other bishops.

See **How ALL United Methodist Bishops Fail the *Discipline*** on page 6

How ALL United Methodist Bishops Fail the Discipline

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For example, two decades ago, when Northern Illinois Bishop **Joseph Sprague** infamously repudiated such basic Christian doctrines as the accuracy of John's gospel and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, he was not held accountable. On the contrary, he promoted his rejection of these United Methodist Doctrinal Standards at an event hosted by an official United Methodist seminary (Iliff School of Theology in Denver) and the official United Methodist Publishing House later published his views in a book.

At the time, only two other bishops, **Marion Edwards** of North Carolina and **Timothy Whitaker** of Florida, at least offered the soft accountability of publicly challenging Sprague's heresies and defending orthodox doctrine.

Contrast this response with what happened in 2017 when Mountain Sky Conference Bishop **Karen Oliveto** attacked the divinity and sinlessness of Jesus Christ, teaching that we should not "create an idol out of him," and accusing the Messiah of having had "his bigotries and prejudices." Similarly, in 2022, Iowa Bishop **Kennetha Bigham-Tsai** was elected shortly after declaring that in the UMC, "it is not important that we agree on who Christ is." These teachings were widely noted and decried by orthodox United Methodists. But no remaining United Methodist bishop has shown the same courage and conviction as Edwards and Whitaker to offer similar challenges.

Furthermore, the 2016 General Conference adopted reforms to make all bishops accountable to the global Council of Bishops, with a related constitutional amendment enacted in 2018. Previously, accountability for bishops was limited to their own regions. But this victory proved hollow, since the UMC's bishops have collectively refused to implement this new accountability system. Even now that two apportionment-funded bishops—**Cedric Bridgeforth** of the Greater Northwest area and the aforementioned Oliveto—live in open defiance of the rules against ministers having same-sex partners.

Even when orthodox United Methodists achieve key reforms in enhancing accountability standards, these reforms are simply ignored. Even when we work hard to elect bishops who are known as personally orthodox, such bishops have not stopped the anarchy of doctrine and discipline within even their own areas, and they shrink from insisting on even soft accountability for rogue liberal bishops.

This highlights how fundamentally impossible reform has become in the United Methodist Church. 🚫

FOR REFLECTION: Consider how Paul handled perhaps the very first congregation to take a "Reconciling" or "open and affirming" approach to sexual sin in 1 Corinthians 5. See also 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

UMAction Briefing

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

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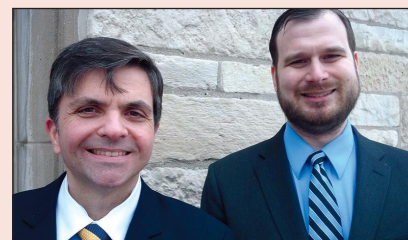
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IRD President Mark Tooley and UMAction Director John Lomperis

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