

UMAction

Briefing

United Methodist Drag Preacher Comes to Florida

United Methodists in St. Petersburg, Florida, recently hosted a children's sermon with a drag queen who is also a certified candidate for ordination.

Isaac Simmons, bejeweled as "Ms. Penny Cost" in a high slit sequin dress, addressed children during worship at Allendale United Methodist Church on October 2, 2022. Simmons' subsequent adult sermon included a denounce-

Allendale UMC describes itself as "a church that is committed to anti-racism and radical solidarity with folx on the margins."

ment of capitalism, an embrace of Liberation Theology, and a demand that doctrine be overturned in favor of an indiscriminate affirmation equated with God's holy wisdom.

Simmons is a controversial figure within the denomination not only for his drag persona but also for a profanity-laced disparagement of the Bible's unique authority. The denomination's apportionment-funded mouthpiece, the United Methodist News Service, has given Simmons star treatment as the first openly gay candidate to be certified for ministry in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference.

"We have a special guest," Allendale Senior Pastor **Andy Oliver** introduced Simmons to the children. "Are you always dressed up like this?"

"I wish!" Simmons exclaimed. "I only get dressed up like this on special occasions. I kind of feel powerful when I put on a dress like this and a big wig and lots of makeup. It kind of helps me to say things that I don't have the confidence to say outside of it."

Outside of drag performance, Simmons goes by the name of Isaac and uses "they/them" pronouns.

"We, members of the United Methodist Church, any church, or just the common humanity, we have a privilege and a duty to change the very doctrine and systems of oppression which surround us," Simmons preached. "The time of change-making will likely be uncomfortable for you, but just as the liminal last days of Christ's life were uncomfortable for him, the liminal days which rest between now and the end of injustice will be uncomfortable for us all."

Simmons' message stressed finding acceptance, but the preacher's admonitions were not limited to those who decline to embrace contemporary innovations in gender identity and expression.

See United Methodist Drag Preacher Comes to Florida on page 2

Thanksgiving 2022

Inside:

Florida United Methodist Fight Goes to Court 2

UMC Pastor: Abortion Is 'Gray' Issue. 3

United Methodist Church Exits Accelerate 4

U.S. Methodist Polyamory and Africa 6



Isaac Simmons, in character as Ms. Penny Cost, addresses children during worship at Allendale United Methodist Church in St. Petersburg, Florida, on October 2, 2022. (Photo: Allendale UMC / Vimeo screen capture)



A statue of Lady Justice. (Photo: Sang Hyun Cho/Pixabay/Creative Commons)

Florida United Methodist Fight Goes to Court

The Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church is embroiled in a lawsuit with 106 congregations wanting to exit the denomination. So far the Conference has refused to negotiate a settlement. The churches note that United Methodist law under *Discipline* paragraph 2553 requires payment of two years of apportionments plus clergy pension liabilities.

But under Bishop **Ken Carter**, the Florida Conference is adding a significant additional burden on disaffiliating congregations by “requiring a form of liability insurance that is rarely available commercially, and when it is available, is prohibitively expensive.” Florida’s disaffiliation policy is “imposing additional financial

See Florida United Methodist Fight Goes to Court on page 3

United Methodist Drag Preacher Comes to Florida

Continued from page 1

“Doctrine without care only inflicts bloody wounds, and yet, we especially those of us with the privilege of Whiteness, of Cisness, and the privilege of the access to power must be willing to get uncomfortable.”

Quoting Peruvian Roman Catholic Priest and Liberation Theology proponent **Gustavo Gutiérrez**, Simmons decried capitalism, identifying those on “Wall Street and Senate floors” as modern day money changers like the ones Jesus drove from the Temple.

“The face of capitalism is poverty, it means death. It refers to the destruction of an individual person, people, culture and tradition. That is, the goal of a theology of capitalism is the destruction of personhood, the prolongment of pain, and the dehumanization of worth.”

Allendale UMC describes itself as “a church that is committed to anti-racism and radical solidarity with folx¹ on the margins.” Placards in the sanctuary read “your silence is violence” and feature imagery including a raised fist. The church has hosted, and its clergy have celebrated, same-sex marriage ceremonies in violation of the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, which states that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching” and that officiating same-sex weddings is a chargeable offense.

The church appears to have few children—only two came forward for Simmons’ talk. Data provided by the Florida Annual Conference reports an average Sunday attendance at Allendale UMC of 66 persons in 2021, with one child baptized.

“One of the things I think is great about Ms. Penny Cost is that she reminds us that we follow a God who calls us not to conform to things of this world,” Oliver told the children of his congregation. “We are supposed to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. That means what I think today may have to change tomorrow if I continue to renew my mind. It’s so cool that we serve a God who calls us to continue to grow, to continue to change into something new and not be bound by the ways that the world confines us sometimes.”

Oliver, a graduate of United Methodist-affiliated Duke Divinity School, serves as national president of the Methodist Federation for Social Action board and characterizes himself as “grounded in liberation theology and following Jesus” as “a community organizer who always located himself with the oppressed, helping them to use their power to dismantle evil.”

The Florida annual conference has struggled in recent years, declining from an average weekly worship attendance of 142,177 in 2009 to 109,544 in 2019, a loss of 32,633 members (down 23 percent across the past decade) according to data made available in the Florida Annual Conference 2020 Journal. The conference is presently embroiled in a lawsuit with an ethnically diverse group of 106 congregations seeking to depart the denomination.

Video from the Sunday service has been made available by Allendale UMC on their Vimeo channel and is viewable at: <https://juicyecumenism.com/2022/10/07/methodist-drag-queen-ms-penny-cost-returns-in-florida-childrens-sermon/> 🌸

¹ “Folx” is an alternate spelling of “folks” used to indicate inclusion of people groups that are usually marginalized, especially the LGBTQ community.

UMC Pastor: Abortion Is ‘Gray’ Issue

In August, pro-life activists in Kansas tried to add language to the state constitution codifying that nothing in their constitution guarantees the right to abortion (a 2019 Kansas Supreme Court decision had ruled that the state constitution includes a right to bodily autonomy that includes abortion). The effort, entitled the “Value Them Both Amendment,” failed by a wide margin.

Before the election, **Adam Hamilton**, pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, held a July 27 “Conversation About Faith and Abortion” with his congregants and others.

Hamilton’s church is the largest in U.S. United Methodism. He identifies as a “centrist” who opposes his denomination’s traditional teachings about marriage and sexuality.

Before the event, a survey of Hamilton’s church on abortion got 4,393 responses, with respondents comprised of 77% women and 23% men. Pro-choice attitudes outnumbered pro-life attitudes by 47% to 44%, including 11% who favored abortion’s legality until birth, compared to 1% wanting to criminalize abortion without exceptions.

Hamilton noted that “most people are somewhere not on the ends, but somewhere closer to the middle” on regulating abortion. The plurality response suggested “I

believe abortion is wrong, but I don’t believe I should be legislating that to other people,” with 23% of respondents choosing that answer. Hamilton interpreted his role as not

telling people “How [they] should vote on August 2,” but rather how they might “better understand people in different places.”

“If you’re a Christian,” Hamilton summarized, “you are trying to do God’s will and you are trying to understand what God would have you do.”

Hamilton describes himself as “pro-life with a heavy heart, and the heavy heart means that [I have] compassion for people who are

walking through really horrible times.” This heavy heart, he elaborated, also meant that “there may be situations that I don’t fully understand, but that may merit or may call for” abortion.

Still, Hamilton maintained that despite that possibility, he doesn’t “ever give advice to somebody to have an abortion.” Indeed, in an attempt to limit the total number of abortions, Hamilton also maintained that “birth control” should be “made free and accessible to anyone.” He insisted that both sides had legitimate desires and that ultimately Christians need to listen to each other and share God’s love. ✝



The Rev. Adam Hamilton. (Photo: UM News).

Florida United Methodist Fight Goes to Court

Continued from page 2

and other requirements that in effect block churches from disaffiliating by making it unaffordable.” Furthermore, there are other options in church law that could have allowed congregations to disaffiliate on less burdensome terms than Paragraph 2553, but Carter has declined to offer such alternatives.

Florida activist pastor **Andy Oliver** has officiated more than a half-dozen same-sex weddings at his St. Petersburg church with no real consequences from Bishop Carter, who has publicly pledged to block all accountability processes for violations of the denomination’s homosexuality-related standards in both the Florida and Western North Carolina Conferences. In September, Oliver hosted United Methodist

ordination candidate and drag queen Isaac Simmons, who gave the children’s sermon in drag as “Ms. Penny Cost.”

As the lawsuit notes, Carter is trying to force these 106 Florida UMC congregations into “the unconscionable choice of remaining with The UMC when it has admittedly stopped enforcing the doctrine” of its own *Discipline*,” “giving to The UMC all of their property which was purchased and maintained—in some cases for decades if not more than a century—by their own employees, parishioners, and donors; or paying to The UMC an arbitrary, onerous, and often prohibitive sum of money determined in the sole discretion” of annual conference officials. ✝

United Methodist Church Exits Accelerate

United Methodist exits are accelerating, with thousands of congregations in various stages of leaving. In Europe, the Bulgaria-Romania Annual Conference and the Slovakia District have already voted to leave the United Methodist Church and join the Global Methodist Church (GMC).

At least 260 of 779 churches in the (eastern) North Carolina Conference, or one third, have voted to disaffiliate or are preparing to potentially do so next year, according to *The Carolina Journal*. One hundred eighty have already taken their votes to leave this year. According to a GMC organizer, more than 150 of these plan to join the GMC.

Meanwhile, 118 churches, or 28 percent of the total, have notified the Peninsula-Delaware Conference that they plan to exit. This number shocked conference officials, as the churches organized within only a few weeks when notified that Bishop **Latrelle Easterling** was going to impose a 50% real estate value surcharge on exit costs after an arbitrary deadline. The exiting churches contribute \$1.4 million to the conference's budget, which was \$4.8 million in 2021. It's believed another 75–100 churches would like to leave but failed to meet the deadline. Possibly some will litigate.

Additionally, Dallas-area St. Andrew United Methodist Church of Plano, with 6,500 members, has voted to exit United Methodism. Its pastor is **Arthur Jones**, son of Houston Bishop **Scott Jones**, and nephew of former Duke Divinity School dean **Greg Jones**.

The church's website notes that the church's now deceased former longtime pastor had started considering disaffiliation years ago and asked church leaders to "monitor the inevitable fragmenting of the United Methodist Church." That pastor died in July but had left a recording urging disaffiliation.

Reportedly at least 500 UMC churches in the state of Texas, including four of the top six by membership and a strong majority of those in Northwest Texas, have exited or plan to. St. Andrew is the state's seventh-largest United Methodist church.

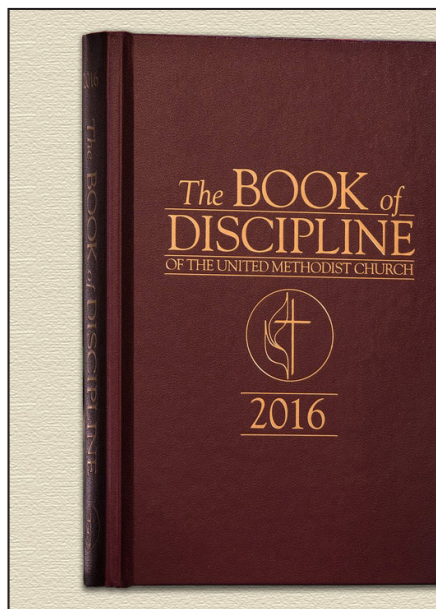
"We can protect our finances, our property and our pastors by going in a new direction," the church explained, now calling itself St. Andrew Methodist Church. It has not yet decided about affiliation with another denomination. Its statement said: "We will be looking to create affiliations with those who also desire greater accountability with more efficient systems and structures than we have had with the UMC," they said. "We do not desire long-term independence. Instead, we want to take the time to fully explore the right affiliations to ensure our church can remain mission focused and step into the future."

Many churches are voting this year to exit in time for confirmation by special annual conferences meeting this fall. Others are voting in time for annual conferences next year.

The Carolina Journal noted that total likely exits for the Western North Carolina Conference are not known but 41 churches there exited between 2021 and 2022. With Florida's notoriously heavy-handed liberal Bishop **Ken Carter** presiding over the Western North Carolina Conference, some churches there are litigating.

In the Virginia Conference, with 1,175 churches, 13 church exits will be confirmed at a special annual conference in October, with reportedly another 125 so far preparing for exit next year.

It's expected that 1,500 (and likely more) churches will vote to exit by the end of this year, with perhaps a total of 3,000–5,000 churches exiting by the end of 2023. *United Methodist Book of Discipline* Paragraph 2553 allows congregations to exit with property by the end of 2023. But exits must be confirmed by votes of annual conferences, which typically meet in May or June. Congregations that wait until after the deadline their annual



“Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate ...”

Paragraph 2553 is a new church law that allows congregations to leave with property under limited conditions. (Photo: Mike DuBose; illustration: Laurens Glass/UM News).

conference sets for voting to disaffiliate before the 2023 annual conference session will miss their last chance to use this provision.

Exiting churches must pay two years of apportionments and pension liabilities. In the Virginia Conference, the total equals about five or six times annual apportionments. But some very liberal bishops and other regional leaders, like Bishop Easterling, who presides over the Baltimore-Washington and Peninsula-Delaware conferences, along with Bishop **John Schol** of New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania, are adding exorbitant surcharges, making exit very difficult and prompting likely

See United Methodist Church Exits Accelerate on page 6

U.S. Methodist Polyamory and Africa

Recently a United Methodist minister anonymously posted an article in a Pittsburgh newspaper identifying himself and his wife as actively polyamorous but regretting they must operate secretly without church affirmation. He hoped for a day when, as a pastor, he might openly have multiple sexual partners of both sexes.

That day may not be too far off. The 2019 United Methodist General Conference reaffirmed traditional sexual teachings. But 40% of delegates voted for the “Simple Plan” to more broadly delete disapproval of extra-marital sex from the denominational law book. With many traditional congregations now exiting the denomination, it’s much more likely that some version of the “Simple Plan” eventually will prevail, in law and/or practice. The polyamorous pastor and his wife can then operate openly.

Meanwhile, a recent statement from the United Methodist bishops in Africa affirmed their plans to remain United Methodist and disavowed any advocacy for following many U.S. traditionalists who are exiting. The statement was widely circulated by U.S. church liberals as proof that Africa will remain United Methodist even after denominational liberalization. The Africa

The Africa Initiative, a group of African laity and clergy advocating for traditional beliefs, was specifically targeted by the bishops, and they responded. Having successfully worked with U.S. traditionalists to uphold orthodox sexual standards, mostly recently at the 2019 General Conference, the Africa Initiative says it will stay United Methodist through the 2024 General Conference. But it will not remain in a denomination that liberalizes to accept same-sex marriage. The U.S.-based Wesleyan Covenant Association, which partners with the Africa Initiative, also responded to the bishops.

United Methodist bishops in Africa must navigate carefully. Few of them are themselves liberal by American standards. But their salaries and much of their program funding comes from the U.S. They perceive themselves as reliant on liberal U.S. bishops and church structures. Before the 2019 General Conference, apparently several African bishops assured liberal U.S. bishops that their delegates would support the defeated “One Church Plan” at the 2019 General Conference that would have allowed the U.S. church to sexually liberalize. But Africans voted nearly unanimously against that plan, proof that either their bishops could not speak for their people, or that the bishops were disingenuous in their assurances.

United Methodists in Africa are overwhelmingly traditionalist and evangelistic, far more so than even conservatives in the U.S. church. They have close to zero tolerance for sexual or theological liberalization. Whatever the preferences of some of their bishops, it’s unlikely that many grassroots members would remain in a liberalized United Methodist Church. U.S. liberals of course hope that under a “One Church Plan” the U.S. church could liberalize while allowing other regions to operate under their own rules. So, the U.S. church would have same-sex rites and clergy who are actively sexual outside of traditional marriage, perhaps including polyamory. But Africa, along with United Methodist churches in the Philippines and Europe, could contrive their own rules (perhaps temporarily).

Why do U.S. liberals want Africa to remain United Methodist when Africans overwhelmingly oppose the liberals’ chief ecclesial agenda of full sexual liberalization? Maybe it’s mostly for optics. Maybe U.S. liberals want to boast they are part of an international church, parts of which are growing. But they do not explain why they wish to remain coalesced with churches they find profoundly unjust, discriminatory, and even bigoted. It’s common for U.S. liberals to denounce African delegates at General Conference for being hateful in their disapproval of non-traditional sexuality.

U.S. liberals, accustomed to their dominance in the U.S. church, maybe have not fully realized that Africa is now the



Greater Nhwatiwa (in purple dress), wife of Bishop Eben K. Nhwatiwa (left), explains the history and significance of the Chin'ando prayer mountain to bishops attending the Africa College of Bishops retreat held Sept. 5–8 at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. The bishops released a statement at the close of the retreat calling for unity in The United Methodist Church while condemning traditionalist advocacy groups looking to break up the denomination. (Photo: Eveline Chikwanah/UM News).

statement listed names of bishops who were “present” without specifically asserting they voted for the statement. Several bishops reportedly spoke against the statement. Nigerian Bishop **John Wesley Yohanna** told United Methodist News Service that he was not present and opposed the statement. He separately told IRD/UMAction, “Rather I support Africa Initiative and Wesleyan Covenant Association because of their views on the Bible” and the standards of the UMC *Book of Discipline*.

See U.S. Methodist Polyamory and Africa on page 6

U.S. Methodist Polyamory and Africa

Continued from page 5

majority in United Methodism. According to 2020 statistics, Africa has 7 million members, or 53% of total membership, versus 6.2 million in the U.S., which has been losing 200,000 annually while Africa was gaining twice that number each year. After the impact of the pandemic, and with hundreds of thousands of U.S. conservatives leaving United Methodism, it's likely that United Methodism will soon be 60% or even 70% African.

Presumably, U.S. liberals assume that Africa, even as the growing and eventually overwhelming majority, will continue to accept subordinate status, leaving predominantly white U.S. liberals largely in control. This may assume too much. It's true that delegate allocations for General Conference do not fully recognize Africa's strength. So, the 2024 General Conference may only be about 40% African, even though Africa contains 53% of church members and their number is climbing. The Philippines and Europe together have 8% of delegates, meaning the U.S. church is likely to maintain a bare majority. Possibly U.S. liberals will have a slim majority at the 2024 General Conference to sexually liberalize. But the 2028 General Conference may be more difficult and unwieldy.

United Methodists in Africa—bishops, clergy, and laity—have long wanted to keep United Methodism together while retaining traditional sexual teachings. Unlike the U.S., official church rules on sexuality are officially upheld in Africa. But many clergy and lay leaders in Africa, many of them General Conference delegates, have reluctantly come to accept that church institutional cohesion is no longer possible because U.S. church leadership refuses to uphold church law. However, bishops in Africa, at least publicly, are not accepting that reality and for now are largely insisting on a United Methodist future.

The future for United Methodism is not easily predictable. But it is fairly certain that very few of the 7 million United Methodists in Africa ultimately will remain in a church with heterodox and sexually liberal teachings, much less Pittsburgh-style polyamory. And the growing African majority likely will not long endure rule by U.S. liberals who are now a fast-shrinking minority. ✚

United Methodist Church Exits Accelerate

Continued from page 4

litigation. More than 100 churches in the Florida Conference are suing Bishop Carter and the conference over an exorbitant insurance charge he has added to exit costs.

After 2023, there is no clear path for United Methodist congregations to exit the denomination. The 2024 General Conference could approve another exit pathway but that is nothing to count on. Paragraph 2553 was ratified by the 2019 Special General Conference by less than 52 percent, after being strongly pushed by traditionalist leaders against fierce opposition. Liberals may have a majority in 2024. ✚

UMAction Briefing

*A newsletter for United Methodists working for
Scripture-based renewal and reform in our denomination*

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