

NEWS

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



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Theological differences and a property dispute are among the reasons more than 100 churches in Florida filed suit Thursday against their governing body, the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The lead plaintiff, Grace United Methodist Church in Lawtey, is suing the conference contending that church leadership imposed a hefty exit payment as a condition of leaving the broader United Methodist Church.

The underlying disagreement is largely centered around questions involving the marriage of LGBTQ couples by UMC clergy and the ordination of LGBTQ members who wish to serve churches as clergy.

The backstory:

United Methodist Church splits over disagreements about LGBTQ inclusion
Methodists meet as some churches ask to separate from denomination

From 2019: Tallahassee United Methodist churches await vote on LGBTQ marriage, clergy induction

In particular, the lawsuit accuses Kenneth Carter — who leads as Resident Bishop of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church — of violating the Book of Discipline by non-enforcement against an openly lesbian bishop and inaction against a progressive reverend based in St. Petersburg.

Methodist church doctrine historically maintains that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching" and prohibits the church participation in same-sex weddings.

Grace Church, like other Methodist churches, adhere to a "Book of Discipline." The Discipline — as it is also known — details the denomination's beliefs and includes a land trust provision that governs the management and ownership of local churches.

Council of Bishops and Bishop Kenneth Carter . . . "[refuse] to abide by and enforce the doctrinal positions in the Book of Discipline, effectively shifting the theology in the practice of The UMC despite the Book of Discipline explicitly rejecting the doctrinal positions it encourages and allows," the lawsuit states.

Denominational divide: Global Methodist Church announces May launch, split from United Methodist Church over LGBTQ rights

A church breaking away — and taking its property with them — is not uncommon and is typically OK'd by the denomination without controversy or cost, the 106 plaintiffs argue in the 36-page filing.

But the conference, they say, is requiring them to pay a "large lump sum" for the paid-off building, even though it was acquired in 1885 before the conference even existed.

"I am appalled at the behavior of the Florida Annual Conference and their complete indifference to the harm that they are inflicting on these churches and their disregard for Florida law," said Attorney David Gibbs III, lead attorney for the churches. "We are confident that a Florida jury will remove the Conference's hold on these churches' properties, releasing them from this oppression."

In a press release, the plaintiffs accuse the conference of refusing to settle the matter outside of court.

While the church maintains that "all properties" are held in trust of the entire denomination, the plaintiffs argue that the United Methodist Church has repeatedly acted outside of the Discipline — therefore breaching the trust and Book of Discipline.

Florida law, the churches further note, requires trustees to "administer the trust in good faith" and "in accordance with its terms and purposes and the interests of the beneficiaries."

Background on the schism

Friday's filing marks the latest dustup between Methodist churches in recent history. According to the Wesleyan Covenant Association of Florida, the 107 churches seeking to leave the Methodist Church account for roughly 20% of the 650 in Florida. Those churches, the association said, represent a diverse group of large and small churches of varying ethnic backgrounds.

"We are not leaving The United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church has left us," said Jay Therrell, President of the WCA – Florida. "After a decades-long rise of theological liberalism, the selective enforcement of our denominational laws, and a strong surge in the promotion of partisan politics, our churches long for the day of being able to unite with like-minded Christians who focus on sharing the Good News of Jesus and help people to be transformed by His salvation."

The disaffiliated churches plan to join Global Methodist Church, a new and conservative Methodist denomination. Meanwhile, the United Methodist church remains the nation's largest Protestant denomination with more than 6.2 million members in the U.S. according to 2020 data.

Conference pens an open letter

In a letter published to clergy and members, the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church described themselves as "deeply grieved" by the news and vowed to provide churches with a "gracious exit" in accordance with their agreement.

They also disputed claims alleging they've departed from "doctrinal standards." Alternatively, they portrayed themselves as a church on a journey to serve "all people." Carter published the open letter Friday evening.

"In all this, our overarching goal is to move through this process in a spirit where we can support, bless and love each other," wrote Carter, who highlighted the "fairness and responsibility" churches have onto one another.

He continued: "A tenet of our faith is that we embrace a Church built in loving relationships rather than uniformity in thought and action. As John Wesley is quoted 'though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?'"

The letter lays out various concerns about the "abrupt separation" and its potential ripple effects. Such a move, Carter wrote, can complicate the pensions of staff, mission work abroad and other community projects.

Carter took issue, too, with the suit at-large, saying the law firm representing the churches is attempting to bypass the agreement, which is ultimately designed to foster an "open and transparent processes."

The letter includes a sole request: "We ask that, despite their haste, these groups seeking to break away live up to the responsibilities established by the General Conference in 2019, and that they not cause pain, damage or disparage other United Methodist churches, other members in their churches or other pastors, or the Conference."

A full copy of the letter is available online.

Churches that have signed on to the lawsuit

Grace United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Altoona United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Beach United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Bethel United Methodist Church of Lake City, Inc.,
Boyd New Life Methodist Church, Inc.,
Bristol United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Calvary United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Calvary United Methodist Church, Inc. Of Tallahassee,
Christ United Methodist Church of Hastings, Florida, Inc.,
Christ United Methodist Church of Venice, Inc.,
Citra First United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Community Methodist Church of Casselberry, Florida, Inc.,
Community United Methodist Church of San Antonio, Inc.,
Coral Way United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Crossroad United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Deer Lake United Methodist Church, Inc.,
De Leon Springs United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Faith United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Faith United Methodist Church of Jacksonville, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Apopka, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Bushnell, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Callahan, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Clermont, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Deland, Florida, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Frostproof, Inc.,

First United Methodist Church of Hobe Sound, Florida, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Lake City, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Macclenny, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church Monticello,
First United Methodist Church of Starke, Florida, Incorporated,
First United Methodist Church of Tarpon Springs, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Zephyrhills, Inc.,
First United Methodist Church of Zolfo Springs, Inc.,
Florahome United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Floral City United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Fort Ogden Community Church, Inc.,
Fort White United Methodist Church Inc.,
Garden City United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Geneva United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Georgianna Church, Inc.,
Glen Julia Methodist Church,
Grace United Methodist Church of Lake Mary, Inc.,
Greater Bell United Methodist Church,
Greensboro United Methodist Church,
Hickory Grove United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Iglesia Metodista Unida Westwood Inc.,
Keystone United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Korean United Methodist Church of South Florida, Inc.,
Lake Bird Methodist Church, Inc.,
Lake Magdalene United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Lake Shore United Methodist Church, Incorporated,
Lakewood United Methodist Church of Jacksonville, Inc.,
Lee United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Lifesong United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Madison First United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Memorial United Methodist Church of Lake Placid, Inc.,
Mims United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Myakka City United Methodist Church, Inc.,
North Hialeah United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Old Miakka United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Old Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church,
Oneco United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Ortega United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Paisley United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Peace United Methodist Church Hispanic, Inc.,
Pine Castle Methodist Church, Inc.,
Pine Level United Methodist Church, Inc.,

Pinetta United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Pisgah United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Pleasant Grove United Methodist Church,
Port Charlotte United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Ridge Manor Community United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Riverside United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Robert M. Hendry Memorial Methodist Church, Inc.,
Rockledge United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Saint James United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Salem United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Sardis Memorial United Methodist Church,
Spring Glen United Methodist Church, Incorporated,
Spring Hill United Methodist Church,
Spring Lake United Methodist Church, Inc.,
St. John United Methodist Church of Sebring, Inc.,
St. Johns United Methodist Church, Inc.
Sycamore United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Tallahassee Heights United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Tamiami Christian School Center, Inc.,
The Carlson Memorial United Methodist Church, Inc.,
The First United Methodist Church of Clewiston, Florida, Inc.,
The First United Methodist Church of Fort Meade, Inc.,
The First United Methodist Church of Immokalee, Inc.,
The First United Methodist Church of Interlachen, Inc.,
The First United Methodist Church of Oviedo, Inc.,
The First United Methodist Church of Spring Hill, Inc.,
The Lake Gibson United Methodist Church, Inc.,
The Miccosukee United Methodist Church, Inc.,
The Venice-Nokomis United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Trinity United Methodist Church of Arcadia Florida, Inc.
Trinity United Methodist Church of Charlotte Harbor, Inc.,
Trinity United Methodist Church of Palatka, Inc.,
United Methodist Church of Trenton, Inc.,
University Carillon United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Waukeelah United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Wesconnett United Methodist, Inc.,
Wesley Hispanic United Methodist Church, Inc.,
Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church of Lake City, Inc., And
Yulee United Methodist Church, Inc.

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