

# Greenville News

GREENVILLE

## Prominent Greenville church could split from United Methodist Church over LGBTQ rights



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Greenville News

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### Key Points

No UMC church in SC has formally started disaffiliation.

More than 300 UMC churches nationwide have disaffiliated.

Exactly how the process will work and what it would mean are still to be determined.

A group at Greenville's influential Buncombe Street United Methodist Church is exploring options.

*This story has been updated to clarify the scope of the 2019 General Conference.*

Buncombe Street United Methodist Church is discussing leaving the denomination after conversations about LGBTQ rights lead to discovering how little control local churches have.

A 2019 special session of the UMC's governing body created a clear exit path for churches that don't adhere to the original interpretation of the denomination's tenets on homosexuality but the conversation now includes the authority of scripture and the sovereignty of Jesus.

South Carolina UMC officials are barring churches from taking the same path 88 neighboring churches in western North Carolina and northeast Georgia have used to disaffiliate.

The governing body's next meeting to decide the interpretation of UMC law isn't until 2024 – months after the path to disaffiliate closes to United Methodist Churches across the globe.

For Buncombe Street, that puts its theology, leadership, congregation and the future of a multi-million-dollar campus in downtown Greenville in limbo.

## **Methodists quietly explore split, secretly sound off on LGBTQ views**

When the United Methodist Church General Conference met in 2019, the governing body voted to reinforce bans on same-gender weddings and LGBTQ clergy. It also created Paragraph 2553 – a pathway for disaffiliation based on disagreements surrounding “homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”

Paragraph 2553 gives congregations until December 31, 2023, to take their votes on separating if their interpretation differs from the church's conservative view in its laws known as the Book of Discipline. In South Carolina, progressive churches have a way out.

The Buncombe Street UMC council voted in April to take the first step toward disaffiliation by hosting a special church conference this fall to take a congregation-wide vote on disaffiliation.

Still, the group at Buncombe Street feels stuck as UMC allows practices that go against the Book of Discipline, even as it upholds their shared traditional views. There have been no LGBTQ weddings by UMC clergy and there are no ordained self-avowed LGBTQ preachers in South Carolina, but that's not the case across America.

The February 2019 vote should have removed any self-avowed practicing homosexual clergy, yet Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian, still serves as a bishop in the Mountain Sky region after her consecration in 2016.

A Florida pastor performed a same-sex wedding just days after the vote was taken and remains in the clergy. A preacher who identifies as queer in Maryland who has spoken openly about the UMC turning its back on him is still on the church's payroll.

Aside from LGBTQ members' place in the United Methodist Church, congregants began to discuss the inconsistency in how the General Conference was enforcing its own laws.

In June, 70 churches in northeast Georgia voted to disaffiliate at the state's annual conference, 18 exited in western North Carolina, and 14 in Florida. In July, 106 Florida churches filed a lawsuit against their resident bishop and state conference.

Without providing direction on disaffiliation, South Carolina conference Bishop Jonathan Holston urged patience as further instruction comes from the governing bodies of the United Methodist Church.

“What we know is that the General Conference is the only body that speaks for the denomination, and the General Conference will not convene again until 2024,” Holston said. “These are unsettled times that we are navigating, and our hope is that resolution will be achieved when General Conference next meets.”

The UMC could take a liberal stance in 2024, yet Holston is one of two bishops blocking disaffiliation by the 2023 deadline, according to Wesleyan Covenant Association Councilmember Thomas Lambrecht of Spring, Texas.

Nationwide, more than 300 churches have voted to disaffiliate from the UMC.

The longer South Carolina churches wait to begin discussions on disaffiliation, the more difficult it will be to do so, Buncombe Street UMC member Michael Helms said.

“There’s not a right answer or a wrong answer here in terms of the theology of the congregation. It’s just, ‘What is the theology and which way should this church go?’

and we just need to make a decision about it," he said.

"Part of the dynamics are that it's just been kept quiet, and there's never a feeling that there was any urgency to do anything about it. We woke up a little bit early, but we're not the only ones ... a lot of these churches are simply, at this point, not aware."

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## **Buncombe Street United Methodist Church group seeks 'preservation'**

One group calling itself Friends to Preserve Buncombe Street is working to prevent "doctrinal changes occurring in the United Methodist Church from occurring at Buncombe Street."

The group had 215 members on its website as of Aug. 1, 10 of whom chose to support the group anonymously while others have listed their names.

Ten questions and answers are listed with the goal to provide "resources that you need to explore the theological differences within the United Methodist Church and determine the path forward for our church's future."

Helms, who is part of the group, said LGBTQ may be the "dog whistle" calling attention to the matter, but the key to the conversation is education about the depth of problems in the UMC.

"The biggest goal is for our congregation to have a thorough knowledge of what all the issues are with regard to theology and with regard to the United Methodist Church," Helms told The News. "Another concern of mine that's part of all this, too, is how large – and how expensive – of a bureaucracy it has become. It is taking a lot of the decision-making away from the local churches."

Buncombe Street UMC created a Way Forward Task Force in May to facilitate conversations and educate the congregation on UMC issues.

The Buncombe Street church was founded in 1834. The start of its campus — which takes up most of the 200 block on Buncombe Street between Richardson and Academy streets — was built in 1873.

The church joined the United Methodist Church denomination in 1968, entering its property into the UMC ownership trust. If the congregation disaffiliates, it risks losing the 149-year-old sanctuary.

It serves as a house of worship for prominent members of the Greenville community with multiple Sunday services on two campuses. Buncombe Street UMC had 2,479 members in 2021, according to the state UMC office, making it the largest congregation in the Greenville district and sixth-largest in the state.

It's also the second-largest contributor to the state UMC's budget.

## **United Methodist Church payments top \$1 million in Greenville District**

Buncombe Street United Methodist Church was the Greenville District's largest apportionment contributor in 2021, giving 100% of the requested \$418,670 to the state conference. Covenant UMC in Greer, Advent UMC in Simpsonville and Mauldin UMC also contributed six-digit balances of \$242,187, \$161,976 and \$152,758, respectively.

The state requests these contributions calculated on a congregation's financial status and the Annual Conference's overall budget.

Five churches in the Greenville District contributed \$0 of their apportionment in 2021, alongside 22 others across the state. Mt. Horeb UMC in Columbia was the state's highest apportionment at \$472,670.

The state passed a \$15,612,383 budget for fiscal year 2023 at its June conference. In 2021, the Greenville District contributed \$1.7 million in apportionments.

The United Methodist Church sets its budget in four-year increments to align with the General Conference schedule. The 2021 through 2024 budget was initially proposed at \$493,768,024. That's an 18.3% decrease from the previous \$604 million budget as the church has admitted the potential split will hurt its finances.

A primary contributor is talking about leaving and the Greenville County Assessor's Office lists a total fair market value of Buncombe Street's various properties at more than \$5.6 million.

What happens to the Buncombe Street assets if its members disaffiliate isn't clear.

The Book of Discipline outlines in paragraph 2549 what happens when a church building is no longer used for its original purpose but abandoning the buildings is a risky option.

Without further guidance from the General Conference, which postponed its 2020 meeting to 2022 and again to 2024, some groups within the UMC across America began searching for and creating alternatives for the denomination.

The Global Methodist Church, launched on May 1, is one of those alternatives for conservative members of the UMC who want to keep a traditional interpretation of the Book of Discipline. That interpretation would not allow for same-sex weddings or ordain clergy who were "not chaste in singleness or faithful in heterosexual marriage," according to GMC spokesperson Keith Boyette.

## **Buncombe Street council chair says process has been confusing**

Despite the six-figure funds coming from the church, there's not much guidance coming from the South Carolina UMC office for Buncombe Street. Church Council Chair Krista Bannister said the process has been confusing since neighboring states

have clear paths for disaffiliation while South Carolina's United Methodists haven't been given a transparent option.

"Some bishops and conferences in the United Methodist Church are not abiding by the current Book of Discipline," she said. "Many committed Methodists want to remain true to our historical confessions of their faith, scriptural interpretation and the Wesleyan way as the current Book of Discipline requires."

Many members of clergy are hesitant to take a public stance on the matter, leaving their congregations further in the dark. UMC ministers are appointed by the state bishop, meaning their livelihoods are ultimately controlled by one person.

As more nontraditional pastors graduate from seminary schools, the more likely it is a traditional congregation will wind up with a preacher who doesn't share their beliefs, Helms noted. Once a UMC bishop assigns placement, the congregation has no further say.

Buncombe Street UMC Pastor Brian Gilmer, who joined the church in July 2020, declined to speak to The News in person or over the phone.

"As the Buncombe Street family continues to educate ourselves, continues to have a holy conversation about the future of our church, my prayer is that we don't get consumed by what might happen or what could happen to the point that we lose sight of our mission — and that we don't forget to love each other," Gilmer said in a written statement sent to The News.

A conference at Buncombe Street has been set for October when the congregation could vote to begin the formal disaffiliation process — whatever that may be.

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