



A Bible is lit by stained glass in the sanctuary at St. Luke's United Methodist Church. NATHAN J. FISH/THE OKLAHOMAN

'WE'RE GOING TO BE INCLUSIVE'

State's largest United Methodist church may cut denominational ties



Carla Hinton

The Oklahoman

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A prominent house of worship — the largest United Methodist church in Oklahoma — has begun pursuing disaffiliation over the issue of openly gay clergy and same-sex marriage.

The Rev. Bob Long, senior pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist, said the No. 1 point of contention between St. Luke's and the United Methodist Church is the denomination's ban on the ordination of openly gay clergy and same-sex marriage — and the punishments for those who violate these prohibitions.

"We don't agree with that at all," he said. "We're going to be inclusive. We're going to be welcoming to all our children of God."

Long said St. Luke's administrative board met Jan. 9 and unanimously voted 60-0 to begin the process of leave-taking — a series of meetings and other procedures required by the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline, a policy guide. Church members will come together for a formal churchwide vote on the split on March 19 if the congregation chooses that path.

"Back in 2019, at General Conference, they passed a law that provided mandatory punishment for anyone who would do a same sex marriage — we're strongly opposed to that," Long said. "We feel that that is wrong. We feel that if a pastor and church decide they want to do a same-sex wedding, they should be allowed to do so. And yet, if someone else says, 'No, I'm not comfortable doing that,' they shouldn't be forced to do so."

Long said if St. Luke's ultimately votes to disaffiliate, the church will be one of the founding members of the new Wesley Methodist Society, which he described as a loose association of Methodist churches in Oklahoma and Texas. These churches, he said, "will really be bound theologically by the belief that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbors as yourself."

"We're not going to try to tell each other all this doctrine and dogma that you have to believe this or have to believe that," Long said. "We're going to focus on what does it mean to love God and love each other, and we will be there to support each other. We will be there to hold each other accountable: Are you running your church responsibly, are you still getting your audits, are you still doing all the safety procedures and all that."

Long said the church's leadership also has been concerned about the decline of the United Methodist Church and the rising costs to the local church to fund the denominational structure.

"We believe the structure should exist to support the local church and not the local church to support the denominational structure," he said.

St. Luke's decision to pursue disaffiliation is just one of the latest developments in a slow-moving schism occurring within the United Methodist Church — Oklahoma's second-largest faith group — and the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination. Disagreement about the scriptural compatibility of same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay clergy has been at the heart of this growing divide over the course of several decades. The issue appeared to come to a head in 2022, prompting churches across the denomination to sever ties.

Epic announcement

Long said he has received numerous phone calls and emails from people who learned about the church's decision to begin the process of cutting ties after church leaders sent an email about the matter to the congregation on Jan. 9.

St. Luke's isn't the first United Methodist church in Oklahoma to consider and vote on the split, and it won't be the first to officially withdraw from the denomination, if St. Luke's members choose that path. After all, 29 Oklahoma United Methodist churches officially cut ties with the United Methodist Church in October.

However, St. Luke's recent announcement of the coming series of meetings and the church leadership's inclination toward cutting ties are sure to reverberate around the United Methodist Church. One reason is that St. Luke's pro-LGBTQ+ stance is in stark contrast to most of the Oklahoma churches that have already split from the denomination. Even though these disaffiliated churches affirmed the faith group's ban on gay clergy and same-sex marriage, they left because they were disenchanted with what they viewed bishops' refusal to consistently enforce the ban. Some leaders of these more conservative or "traditionalist" congregations said they grew tired of the contentious debates over the gay inclusion issue and some other core theological tenets. Many of these churches have decided to affiliate with the Global Methodist Church, a denomination of conservative congregations that launched in 2022.

Another reason for magnified interest in St. Luke's possible withdrawal is the church's large membership. With more than 8,000 members, St. Luke's is not just the largest United Methodist Church in the state, but it is arguably one of the largest United Methodist churches in the country and one of the largest Christian houses of worship of any denomination in Oklahoma.

St. Luke's decisions may also be of interest because of the church's extensive outreach programs in the Oklahoma City metro area and its support for a variety of United Methodist initiatives and ministries. The church has gained prominence in Oklahoma and on the Unit-

ed Methodist Church's national and international scene because of this community support, along with its interfaith and ecumenical partnerships over the years.

The church is 133 years old and considered one of the historic downtown Oklahoma City churches. Its main campus is at 222 NW 15 in downtown Oklahoma City and satellite campuses are located in Edmond and south Oklahoma City. Long said St. Luke's also has a vibrant online presence, with online worship service increasing from one to five well-attended virtual gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the minister said he wants to make sure the decision to pursue the split isn't viewed as "anti-United Methodist" or a rejection of Methodism. Just because St. Luke's wants to and may ultimately leave the United Methodist Church doesn't mean it is against the denomination, only that "we disagree with some things," Long said.

"We're not leaving Methodism — we are strongly Methodist," he said. "We love John Wesley and his theology and the history of the Methodist Church, so we're not leaving the Methodist history of our church, we just would be getting a different structure from the United Methodist Church."

He said St. Luke's will still support many United Methodist mission programs such as Neighborhood Services Organization, Skyline Urban Ministries, Circle of Care and Oklahoma City University — a United Methodist-affiliated school.

"So, there's a lot of wonderful Methodist missions and organizations we'll continue to work with," he said.

Thus far, response to the church's decision to pursue leave-taking has been positive.

"Every email and every text message that I've received these last two days since the announcement went out, has been positive and good — there's tremendous affirmation and support because we're doing this, as I say, not as anti-UMC," Long said.

"We're making a decision on what we think is going to best position us to go forward in the next 10, 20 and 50 years because things have changed so much. We're trying to get how to we're going to carry out our mission the best and we feel like who we are at St. Luke's isn't going to change one iota — but the structure we operate under is going to change."

Meeting a deadline

The minister said St. Luke's leadership has known that the church might have to take a stand on the issue of gay inclusion ever since the United Methodist Church's 2016 General Assembly gathering. That meeting was contentious, and a special 2019 General Conference gathering also became heated over the same-sex marriage and gay clergy issue.

Delegates at the 2019 General Conference gathering in St. Louis approved the addition of a new paragraph, generally known as "Paragraph 2553," to the denomination's policy book, which would allow for churches to disaffiliate from the denomination based on their disagreement with the United Methodist Church's stance on human sexuality.

The provision of this paragraph will remain in effect until Dec. 31, 2023, so some churches appear to be trying to break away before this provisional deadline. Long said St. Luke's is among them.

Cutting ties by the end of 2023 would allow the historic church to leave with its property and other assets. He said no one knows what a church might be required to do in order to withdraw from the denomination after that deadline.

Oklahoma churches wishing to cut ties before year's end, must have their plans ratified by delegates of the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference. Oklahoma Bishop Jimmy Nunn has said leave-taking matters will be voted on at a special meeting in April and at another special meeting in October.

In a short statement, Nunn said he was aware of St. Luke's plans.

"St. Luke has decided to enter a process available to United Methodist churches," Nunn said.

"We will work with the church as they go through the discernment process."

Long said St. Luke's is looking forward.

"We're dream about the future and carrying all of these ecumenical and social ministries that we have going on so that we fulfill our mission to share God's love and bring hope to the world."