

# Conservatives Quietly Split From United Methodist Church After Years of Loud Debate

It was a “very special Sunday,” the Rev. J.J. Mannschreck explained to his congregation during the traditional service streamed online from Flushing United Methodist Church in Flushing, Michigan.

The congregation shared prayer requests and celebrated what the pastor called “God’s victories”—namely the church’s community garden, which its youth were planning to ready for spring later that day.

Flushing’s United Women of Faith threw a baby shower between services for Mannschreck’s fourth and youngest son, Asher.

And—what made it special—a member of the church’s preaching team delivered her first sermon, about Moses and forgiveness, as part of the current sermon series titled “There and Back Again,” a reference to . Tolkien’s classic novel *The Hobbit*.

What no one mentioned was that Sunday (May 1) was also the launch of the Global Methodist Church, a new theologically conservative denomination splintering from the United Methodist Church that Mannschreck plans to join.

After decades of rancorous debate over the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ United Methodists, a special session of the United Methodist Church’s General Conference and three postponements of a vote to formally split the denomination, the schism finally came “without fanfare, but full of hope, faith, and perseverance.”

That’s how the Rev. Keith Boyette, chairman of the Transitional Leadership Council of the Global Methodist

Church, described the launch of the new denomination in a statement published days earlier on its website.

Sunday's launch, Boyette told Religion News Service last week, "was very definitely driven by practicality and the fact that the postponement of General Conference moved many people to say they were tired of waiting and tired of the conflict not being addressed and resolved by the United Methodist Church."

Delegates have debated questions about sexuality at every quadrennial meeting of the United Methodist Church General Conference since 1972, when language first was added to the denomination's Book of Discipline saying that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

That debate came to a head in 2016, when bishops announced a special session of the General Conference devoted to the topic.

Delegates to the 2019 special session ended up approving something called the Traditional Plan, which strengthened enforcement of language in the denomination's rulebook against the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ members.

Progressive United Methodists pledged to disregard the results of the special session. Conservatives, frustrated by the continuing debate, threatened to leave anyway. Finally, a group representing all different theological viewpoints within the denomination brokered a deal to create a separate "traditionalist" Methodist denomination that would receive \$25 million over the next four years.

Delegates to the 2020 General Conference—which gathers delegates from around the world—were prepared to vote on that proposal, called the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, when COVID-19 swept the globe, canceling their meeting not once, but three times. Currently, it is set for 2024.

The third postponement earlier this year was the last straw for members of the Global Methodist Church's Transitional Leadership Council, which already was laying the groundwork for a new denomination. The council immediately announced it would launch the new denomination on May 1.

The date was driven by practical reasons, according to Boyette: If clergy, churches and regional annual conferences want to join the Global Methodist Church, it first needs to exist.

United Methodist conferences in the U.S. hold their annual meetings in May and June, he said. Over the coming weeks, some may consider pathways to allow churches to leave with their properties. Others may vote for the entire conference to disaffiliate.

Already, the Bulgaria-Romania Provisional Annual Conference has voted to leave the United Methodist Church and join the Global Methodist Church.

At least one retired bishop—Bishop Mike Lowry, a member of the Transitional Leadership Council—has surrendered his credentials to the United Methodist Church for the fledgling denomination.

So has Boyette.

Boyette said the Transitional Leadership Council doesn't know how many more will follow this summer. He did not have numbers Monday for how many clergy, churches or conferences had joined the denomination with the launch, but he believes hundreds of churches across the U.S. already have begun the process to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church, and most will land in the Global Methodist Church.

Some may wait to see what the United Methodist General Conference decides in 2024.

Until the Global Methodist Church holds its convening conference, the Transitional Leadership Council will conduct background checks on clergy and review information submitted by those hoping to join the new denomination to make sure they align with the Global Methodist Church and its Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association—a group of conservative individuals and churches within the United Methodist Church that Boyette also leads—will consider legislation regarding the “future of the WCA and its leadership,” when it holds its global gathering this weekend, he said.

It will also contribute more than \$1 million to the Global Methodist Church from the Next Methodism Fund it created when the protocol was announced, according to Boyette.

The progress toward a new denomination is bittersweet.

“I don’t think anyone is dancing with joy that we are at this place in Methodism. I think there is a sadness that we have come to this and that we find ourselves in this season,” Boyette said.

Bishops echoed that sentiment at last week’s spring meeting of the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

“While I will always wish we could all remain in this church, I’m clear some cannot. I grieve and regret that more than words can express, but I have no interest in serving an echo chamber,” said Bishop Cynthia Fierro-Harvey, outgoing president of the council.

“I am a big-tent church person who believes that every voice is important to the whole, sometimes as annoying as that might be—that every part of the body is important to the whole. I also realize that it might be time to bless and send our sisters and brothers who cannot remain under the big tent,” she said.

As of Sunday, the Global Methodist Church had completed all the necessary steps to be a legal entity, according to its leadership.

And Mannschreck, the pastor of Flushing United Methodist Church, told RNS he was ready to get to work.

He plans to transfer his credentials to the new denomination—but not right away. His congregation will discuss and vote whether to join the Global Methodist Church, too.

The conversation about sexuality is important, Mannschreck said, but he's done having it. His congregation—a church he described as “on the way to nothing” between farmland and Flint and includes young and old, urban and rural, progressive and conservative—is done, too.

It may be the presenting issue, but it's not the only one for many who are considering leaving the United Methodist Church for the Global Methodist Church, according to the pastor, who describes himself as a “traditionalist.”

He remembers when the United Methodist Church launched its Imagine No Malaria campaign in the 2000s, committing to raise \$75 million to combat the disease in Africa. He was excited then by the difference a global denomination could make.

He feels that momentum now again, he said.

“I'm really excited about getting back to work, having had this conversation and made those votes. I'm very excited to move to the next thing,” he said. {eo}

© 2022 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.

*Follow breaking news like this on our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.*