

United Methodist Conference Erupts Into Legal Battle With 15,000-Member Texas Megachurch

A stunning legal battle is unfolding inside The United Methodist Church as a denominational conference takes one of its most prominent congregations to court.

The Horizon Texas Conference filed a civil lawsuit Aug. 10 against Highland Park United Methodist Church, a Dallas megachurch with more than 15,000 members, according to UM News. At the heart of the lawsuit is a question that has become increasingly significant across American Christianity: Who ultimately has authority over the local church?

The controversy dates back to 2022, when Highland Park's church council made sweeping changes to the congregation's articles of incorporation and bylaws. According to UM News, the council changed the corporation's legal name from Highland Park United Methodist Church to Highland Park Methodist Church and removed references to The United Methodist Church, the conference and the denomination's Book of Discipline.

Those revisions went far beyond branding.

Under the amended documents, the church council gained greater control over its own membership, pastoral leadership, the church's mission and ministry, pastoral messaging and even denominational affiliation. The conference's lawsuit alleges the changes were made without the approval of a properly called charge conference.

For a denomination built around a "connectional" system in which bishops and conferences exercise significant authority

over local churches, the implications are enormous.

Bishop Rubén Saenz Jr., who leads the Horizon Texas Conference and serves as president of the UMC Council of Bishops, says the conference wants Highland Park's governance returned to alignment with denominational rules.

"Our purpose is restoration," Saenz told UM News. "Bringing the original governance structure back into alignment with the Book of Discipline so this church can move forward faithfully."

Highland Park is pushing back.



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The Rev. Matt Tuggle, the church's senior minister, called the lawsuit "meritless" and described the conference's decision to sue as "both bewildering and disappointing," according to UM News. He maintained that the 110-year-old congregation remains faithfully United Methodist.

Yet this confrontation is unfolding against a much larger backdrop.

The UMC has endured years of upheaval as thousands of congregations departed amid deep divisions over sexuality and the denomination's theological direction. Highland Park did not leave during the temporary disaffiliation process available from 2019 through 2023.

Then came the UMC's historic 2024 General Conference.

Denominational delegates eliminated longstanding restrictions on same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay clergy. Following those changes, Highland Park's then-senior minister, the Rev. Paul Rasmussen, announced he would exercise his right

under the Book of Discipline not to conduct same-sex weddings at Highland Park. Other pastors, however, could choose to officiate such ceremonies elsewhere.

UM News reported Rasmussen also celebrated the removal of the denomination's 52-year-old declaration that "the practice of homosexuality" was "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Rasmussen has since stepped down from the senior minister position as his Parkinson's disease worsened and now serves as pastor emeritus. Tuggle succeeded him. Interestingly, Rasmussen publicly thanked Saenz for vetting Tuggle's appointment, demonstrating that episcopal involvement continued in at least that leadership transition.

The conference says it did not discover the 2022 governing changes until October 2025. Months of private discussions followed before negotiations broke down and the lawsuit was filed.

UM News does not identify the lawsuit as a battle over same-sex marriage or LGBTQ theology. Its stated focus is governance, denominational oversight and whether Highland Park's leadership had the authority to make the changes it did.

Still, it arrives after years of fractures that have dramatically reshaped Methodism in America.

Now, instead of another congregation simply walking away, one of Texas' largest churches and its denominational leadership could be headed for a courtroom showdown over who gets the final say.

Abby Trivett is a writer and editor for Charisma Media and has a passion for sharing the gospel through the written word. She holds two degrees from Regent University, a B.A. in Communication with a concentration in Journalism and a Master of Arts in Journalism. She is the author of the newly

released book, The Power of Suddenly: Discover How God Can Change Everything in a Moment. For interviews and media inquiries, please contact media@.