

Georgia UMC church leaves denomination in support of LGBTQ rights

by [Heather Hahn](#) in the [October 7, 2020](#) issue



A painted door displayed at Asbury Memorial Church in Savannah, Georgia, proclaims "God's doors are open to all." (Photo courtesy of Asbury Memorial Church)

A church in Savannah, Georgia, is the first congregation in recent years to depart the United Methodist fold in support of LGBTQ inclusion.

Over the past four years, multiple congregations have left the denomination in response to its intensifying disagreement over how accepting to be of homosexuality. Most have done so citing weariness with the debate or a lack of enforcement of the denomination's bans on same-sex weddings and "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy.

However, Asbury Memorial Church—a congregation of more than 300 members—is the first since at least 2016 to leave expressly in opposition to those bans.

New policies approved at a 2019 special session of the UMC General Conference allow congregations to depart the denomination with their property "for reasons of conscience" related to homosexuality, if they meet certain requirements.

Among those requirements is that at least two-thirds of the congregation vote for disaffiliation and a majority of the regional body votes to approve it. Departing churches also must meet certain financial obligations, including paying a share of their conference's unfunded clergy pension liability—that is, what conferences will owe retirees.

Billy Hester, Asbury Memorial's senior minister, acknowledged that leaving comes with a hefty price tag. But he said the congregation could no longer wait to include its LGBTQ members fully in church life.

"I've seen a lot of people die in my congregation, especially LGBTQ people, and there are other people who are getting up in age, and I wanted them to see this day," Hester said.

"Another reason is we really need to be involved in addressing other issues, systemic racism, global warming, so many other issues. . . . This will free us up."

The congregation will now be independent.

In 2019, by a vote of 438-384, UMC delegates from around the globe approved the "traditional plan," which reinforced the denomination's bans on noncelibate gay clergy and instituted mandatory penalties on clergy who officiate at same-gender weddings.

At the time, some delegates expected LGBTQ-friendly churches to be the first to head for the exits. Instead, many congregations that object to the traditional plan have opted to publicly resist it and seek reform from within the denomination.

Still, additional progressive congregations are considering departing.

This month, the New England Conference is set to take up a disaffiliation resolution from Brackett Memorial UMC in Peaks Island, Maine. The church, which has about 92 members, already has signed a disaffiliation agreement with conference trustees.

“We don’t have any reason to believe anything is going to be resolved soon in the United Methodist Church,” said Will Green, the church’s pastor and an openly gay provisional elder. “We felt we had the opportunity . . . to be proactive about our future.”

Eight other New England churches also are weighing disaffiliation but are not planning to bring resolutions yet.

Many other United Methodist congregations and conferences are waiting to see what the next general conference decides.

United Methodists have submitted multiple proposals to resolve the denomination’s longtime debate over homosexuality by splitting the denomination. Among those proposals is the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, a mediated agreement that, if accepted, would allow a new, traditionalist denomination to break away from the United Methodist Church.

Right now, Asbury Memorial is also making plans for new ministries even while still worshipping virtually because of the coronavirus.

About four years ago, the congregation decided not to host any weddings until all couples in the church could marry in its sanctuary. But on September 27, the congregation held a virtual service to recognize all couples who could not be married in their church sanctuary.

“You better have some tissues on hand!” the church’s newsletter said. —United Methodist News Service