

## NEWS

# Keeping faith as denomination changes its views

## CHURCH

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Gingerich has been the pastor of the Sheldon congregation for the last 10 years, but he has been serving in a pastoral role in the denomination for nearly four decades. If things had gone differently in the denomination, Gingerich said, reaching 40 years would have been a milestone he celebrated. Instead, he has received his certificate of ordination from the Global Methodist Church, the conservative breakaway denomination that came into official existence this year.

"June 10 of this year would have been my 38th anniversary," Gingerich said. "Back in 1985 is when I was ordained a deacon, and in 1990, I was ordained an elder in full connection with the United Methodist Church."

He also attended a seminary, Iliff School of Theology in Denver, CO, affiliated with the UMC.

The Sheldon congregation put the matter of disaffiliation to a vote in October, just months after the church celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding. The vote received more than the two-thirds majority required by the denomination to qualify for its "gracious exit" policy, the separation agreement adopted by denominational leaders late last year that allows churches to sever ties with the UMC and yet hold onto their properties.

The move to disaffiliate reflects deepening division within the global denomination, the second-largest Protestant denomination in the United States. As the denomination has fractured along theological and political lines, the most contentious questions have been related to human sexuality, including whether same-sex marriages should be sanctioned in UMC churches and whether openly gay clergy should be candidates for ordination. However, at stake in the debates are deeper disagreements about how to read and interpret the Bible.

"We're still a confessional, creedal church," Gingerich said.

Like the UMC, Faith Community Church continues to affirm the Apostles and Nicene creeds, ecumenical statements of belief which for centuries have defined the basic contours of the historic Christian faith.

However, Faith Community Church has developed its own set of bylaws to govern the church in a new era of denominational independence.

"Bylaws are things that churches agreed on to govern the way we go forward," Gingerich said. "We've stated very clearly that Scripture is the basis for our faith, and if it's in the Scripture, it's truth. And so we believe that God created us male and female, and for each other. And so, we believe in traditional marriage between a man and a woman."

## Schism

Across the country, theologically and politically conservative churches have been leaving the UMC in escalating numbers since 2019, when the denomination's disaffiliation plan, or "gracious exit" policy, passed during the UMC's General Conference.

Since then, observers of the UMC have described the gradual break-

away of some of its churches as a "slow-motion schism."

In Iowa one of the catalysts for the split was a statement issued by Iowa Bishop Laurie Haller, who retired at the beginning of this year. Her statement, issued following the repeated delay of the General Conference, was intended to provide a way forward for churches while they waited for decisions to be made at the denominational level in the spring of 2024. The last General Conference was held in 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I have been attending annual conferences since I was 14 years old," Gingerich said, referring to the yearly meeting of the denomination's regional conferences. "I've only missed about eight of those annual conferences over that time — so I have been a part of all of it unfolding. I was silent at conference most of the time, trying to be respectful of others' views."

He said the statement issued by Haller was a turning point.

Haller's statement affirmed the UMC's commitment to Christianity's historic creeds and confessions. However, it endorsed a number of theological positions that many conservative Christians do not share, including views related to human sexuality that are at odds with the denomination's official Book of Discipline, which prohibits same-sex marriages and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy.

"I felt like they broke covenant with the Book of Discipline that we are currently under," Gingerich said. "That, as well as many other driftings far left — and far away from what I feel is scriptural — caused me to decide I was not going to remain a United Methodist. Our church had leadership within the church that made the decision to present it to the congregation."

Susan Klein of rural Hospers has been attending the former Sheldon United Methodist Church with her husband, Darryl, for 27 years. The Kleins raised their five children, now grown, in the church, and some of them still live nearby and continue to attend. Klein was not part of the church's advisory council when the decision to take a vote was made, but she is now one of the representatives on the council.

"One of the misconceptions I think that people have had is, our principles of belief really didn't change. We've been following them all along" she said.

"It wasn't this particular church — Sheldon United Methodist Church — that changed. It was the United Methodist conference that changed how they were doing things, and the majority of our congregation didn't agree. So, we needed to step out."

Since 2019, more than 5,000 historically United Methodist congregations out of 30,000 nationwide have been granted permission to disaffiliate, with the largest numbers of breakaway churches concentrated in the southeastern United States and rural pockets of the Midwest.

The schism has been unfolding more slowly in the Iowa Conference. As of last year, only one church had left the denomination under the separation agreement. However, the dam broke in 2023, when the separation agreements of 83 churches were approved by conference leaders in May during



The Rev. Kevin Gingerich serves as the pastor at Faith Community Church, which dropped its affiliation with the United Methodist Church effective July 1. (Photo by Aleisa Schat)

the Iowa Annual Conference, which took place over Zoom. The breakaway churches make up 11 percent of the 750 conference churches that remain in Iowa. The congregations choosing disaffiliation will either join a more conservative denomination or become an independent entity.

## Lost members

After the vote, the former Sheldon United Methodist Church lost a relatively small but faithful group of longtime members, some of whom transferred their membership immediately to St. Andrew's United Methodist Church in Sanborn, which has stayed in the denomination.

"The vote was very hard," Gingerich said. "It was never my intent for anyone to feel like they needed to leave. My sermons have not changed at all. Our name had to change, and the symbols have to come off of the building and everything because we are disaffiliated. But we still have the same faith."

Klein said she too has felt the loss of longtime members.

"We miss the people who have chosen not to continue at our church, but there's no anger toward them," she said.

"Everyone's beliefs are on a continuum, and it's just difficult — it's difficult to make it work the best for everybody. And I feel like, you know, we had our vote, and it was a fair vote, and we have to move on from there. But I hate that we've lost some people."

Another question facing the church is whether to affiliate with another denomination. Some UMC churches joining the exodus have become independent congregations while others are joining the new Global Methodist Church.

"We had a lot of people that, when we were going to split, weren't sure if we wanted to go Global or not," Michelle Noack said.

Noack is director of children's ministries at the church, and she has been attending the church with her family for 13 years, since her children were small.

"We had enough people that felt that was too new. They weren't sure what it was all about, and so we didn't want to jump into that," Noack said. "We're going to keep waiting, and we are what we are,

we are what we always have been. And we're going to keep doing that until we feel God leads us a different way."

"We are independent right now," Gingerich said. "We want to be faithful to what we said to the congregation — that we would not immediately become Global Methodists. I think there's a little PTSD with denominations, and we're just a little leery."

The window for churches to leave the UMC closes on Dec. 31, an approaching deadline that helps account for the urgency felt by some N'West Iowa congregations to put the matter of disaffiliation to a vote. The Sheldon church is joined by two other N'West Iowa churches who recently chose to leave the UMC: Archer United Methodist Church and United Methodist Church of Doon. The former Hartley United Methodist Church, which is now Grace Fellowship, finalized its separation from the denomination already in 2021. It was one of the first churches in Iowa to leave and become a non-denominational church.

## New name

Gingerich said his congregation is beginning to emerge from a season of transition and grief, and he is looking forward with hope to the future. His congregation, too, is focusing its energy on forging a new identity as Faith Community Church.

"I'm looking forward to not thinking about the split. That has been a struggle for the last year," he said. "I look forward to putting Christ ahead and setting that behind — to love God with all my heart and not to make love my god."

The church's new name was decided by a vote, and church members were invited to submit their ideas for consideration beforehand. While some members wanted to retain the word "Methodist" in the church's new name, the submission ultimately chosen was put forward by a high school member. Faith Community Church's new circular logo was designed by another member of its high school youth group and features the simple outline of a white cross sitting atop three mountains.

"That was a very exciting time, to see what people would like to be called," Klein said. "It was still, again, difficult, because so many of us who grew up Methodist would have liked to see 'Methodist' remain in the title of the church, which we could have done. But we also knew that those who did not want to disaffiliate were also considering whether they wanted to start a Methodist church in Sheldon. So, we didn't want there to be confusion. But the exciting part about it is that our name came from the congregation, and it came from two of our youth."

Even without "Methodist" in the name, Gingerich believes the newly independent church has continuity with its past.

"Even though we don't retain that name, I retain that identity of one who understands the grace of God reaching out to all people," Gingerich said. "John Wesley, who was the one of the founders of the Methodist movement, believed that Scripture was always the first place to go to for decisions. If the Scriptures didn't allow for a decision — if it wasn't named directly — you would rely on your tradition, and you would rely on reason and experience to form the decision."

The UMC was formed through a merger in 1968, but its roots in a Wesleyan theological tradition go much deeper. At the heart of the

tradition, which grew out of the writings and teachings of Wesley, an 18th-century Anglican priest, is a commitment to personal piety and earnest acts of social service.

"I feel like I am still very much a Wesleyan at heart — it's the idea that we are invited to God's presence through grace, and that we extend that same grace to others, and that we maintain our relationship with Christ through the Scriptures," Gingerich said.

Noack, and her husband, Ron, who is the church custodian, said they did not choose the church because of its denomination — it was the first United Methodist church Michelle had ever attended — and before moving to Iowa from Wisconsin, the Noacks favored nondenominational or evangelical free churches. However, they had family ties to the Sheldon church, and after their first visit, they kept attending with their three young children until eventually they realized they had chosen a church.

"The more we came, the more we said, 'OK, well, I guess this is our church,'" Michelle said.

The Noack and Klein families have been active in keeping the church's existing ministries afloat during a time of transition and loss.

Along with children's programming, Michelle Noack also oversees the summer meal program, which is in its 10th year and provides a free, home-cooked meal to anyone who needs it every weekday during the summer.

Noack said other local organizations contribute funds for the program, but members of other local churches pitch in, too, including some volunteers who left the Sheldon church after its decision to disaffiliate.

"We're still keeping on keeping on here, exactly as we were before," Noack said. "We've lost a few people, which we're sad about, but we wish them the best. They're our fellow Christians, and we love them. We want them to go off and serve God and bring others to God as well."

For her part, Klein has been busy forging a new Connections team to help forge relationships across generations — and across the church's two morning services — and to help facilitate healing and repair after a painful season in the community's shared life.

"Our first priority is to get people to reconnect so that we can grow our service," she said. "The more we can serve, the more people we can welcome in — because they'll see us, and they'll feel welcome to come in."

Noack hopes the move to disaffiliate, along with the church's new name, will draw more visitors, including those who might have stayed away because they were not familiar with the denomination or were worried they would not belong.

"I really do think that the name change is going to bring more people in, because sometimes people don't want to go to a Catholic church or a Lutheran church or a Methodist church," she said. "I feel like maybe our name is going to open it up for more people that were maybe nervous to go to church to be more willing to try this church just because of the name. If that's what gets them in the pews to be able to get close to God, that's a good thing."

"We wanted it to say 'Community Church' because we wanted it to feel like everybody could come," Klein said. "That's the thing with the Methodist Church — we've always been kind of a melting pot. Everyone can come."



Faith Community Church in Sheldon is looking to grow its membership after splitting from its previous affiliation with the United Methodist Church on July 1. (Photo by Justin Rust)