

Groome Church votes to leave Methodist denomination

Citing concerns about exclusionary LGBTQ policy, congregation plans to become independent

By Melissa Steele
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Groome Memorial Church in Lewes announced July 26 that it plans to leave the United Methodist Church, citing concerns over UMC's conservative policies regarding LGBTQ matters.

Church officials released a statement saying members of the church voted to leave the denomination in response to United Methodist Church 2019 bans on same-sex marriages and on allowing openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people and those questioning their sexual identity to serve as clergy. In November 2019, Groome sent a letter to The Rev. Dr. Kyung-Hee Sa, superintendent of the Dover District of the Peninsula-Delaware Conference of the United Methodist Church, signaling its intent to disaffiliate.

“We cannot reconcile the posture of the denomination, after the 2019 General Conference, with the calling of our congregation, or the commandment of love that we believe to be the heart of the Gospel and seek to proclaim and practice in our worship and mission,” wrote members of

Groome Church’s steering committee. “Ultimately this is a question of conscience for the members of Groome Church. We live in the nation’s fourth highest concentration of the LGBTQ community. It is also the fastest growing area of Delaware. The future awaits and we need to get about the business of being on board. The passage of the Traditional Plan [with its LGBTQ bans] forces people away from the church, alienates young people and sets in motion forces that display intolerance, discrimination and are remarkably judgmental, marginalizing an entire subculture of people.”

“The core of our beliefs can be traced back to the origins of Christianity and the unifying/inclusive gospel that was not only lived by Jesus Christ, but proclaimed and carried forth throughout the known world by the apostles. ... Paul preached a gospel that embraced everyone, welcomed and celebrated diversity and excluded only those who could not embrace Jesus as the son of God. The Outreach Ministry of our church embraces and exemplifies inclusion and tolerance,” the steering committee wrote.

The Rev. Will Crossan III of Groome Memorial could not be reached for comment. The Rev. Dr. Kyung-Hee Sa said the annual conference will vote on Groome’s disaffiliation in November, and a few more churches may also seek disaffiliation. “Final disaffiliation result is up in the air, even though local churches decide to leave, due to potential denominational policy change,” she said.

The vote to leave the Methodist denomination is the first step of many as the church seeks its independence. Financial obligations and property ownership of the church, which was established in 1904, will have to be sorted out. Groome officials said the church will follow a disaffiliation plan as it moves forward with separation.

A United Methodist Judicial Council has ruled that in order for a local church to leave the denomination, two-thirds of the congregation and conference must agree to the separation. Then, the annual general assembly must agree with a simple majority vote. “The annual conference as the basic body in the church has the reserved right to make final decisions regarding the disaffiliation of local churches within its boundaries,” the judicial council decision reads.

If approved, Groome would be able to retain its assets after making some payments to the denomination including money used for pensions.

The annual meeting was scheduled in May before it was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, a proposal known as the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation had gained attention with a plan that would allow churches to leave the denomination yet retain church property. The separation proposal was written in opposition to the United Methodist Church's approval of the Traditional Plan that banned same-sex marriages and openly gay clergy. Ironically, another plan to leave the church had been floated by conservative Methodists, even though they supported the Traditional Plan.

In a previous interview before the COVID-19 shutdown, Bishop Peggy Johnson, leader of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church, said she is against a schism that would break apart the denomination.

“I'm a centrist when it comes to wanting a way for people to work together, but because the battle has been awfully long and rather bitter, I guess people are determined to split,” Johnson said. “I think we'll be worse off for it, and I'm sorry we've come to this. There is sensitivity and gifts offered by both sides that is helpful for getting the work done in the best way possible. Nobody is an enemy here, nobody is a bad guy, but it has gotten to the point where people walk into a room, and they're asked which side they are on.”

The Groome steering committee said independent churches are successful and growing. In 2015, the Lewes Presbyterian Church separated from the national Presbyterian Church USA over a liberal interpretation of scripture. The Lewes Presbyterian Church has since aligned with the conservative Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, a denomination formed in 2012.

“The segment of American Protestantism that is successful and growing is universally independent,” the Groome steering committee wrote. “Why? Because it appeals to the underlying principles of American life: freedom to choose, self-governance, liberation from external authority, unrestricted possibilities to explore new ideas and potentials. The possibilities are boundless, and we can welcome to our fellowship whomever we wish; that will be everyone.”

SUBMITTED PHOTO above: Masked and socially distanced, people lined up outside Groome Memorial Church July 26 before a vote by members on whether to leave the United Methodist Church denomination.