

Regardless of theological leaning, United Methodists in Upper New York are all encouraged to follow the example in Acts 2 of the community of Jesus' followers caring for each other – a diverse community that is ready to receive unity as a gift from God.

The impact of church disaffiliations cannot be fully known, but it is clear UNY is

moving into a new season of ministry, with new realities and possibilities.

United Methodists of Upper New York remains a strong network of over 100,000 members in more than 675 congregations committed to living the gospel of Jesus Christ and to being God's love with all our neighbors in all places.

Bishop Héctor's closing remarks on disaffiliations

As leaders and congregations begin to move forward, Bishop Héctor's closing remarks to the October 14th special session seem very appropriate: "Our unity as Christians is not of our doing but God's. For it is not us but God who brings us together, people of different ethnicities, backgrounds,

and walks of life into one family. May we, in this new season, fully embrace the supremacy of love and the spiritual reality of unity in Christ, and as we live into this invitation, may we experience renewal and may more people be compelled to believe the Gospel's good news."

Watch Bishop Héctor's closing remarks



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The Bridge is a Conference Communications Ministry tool that delivers to local churches news and stories of ministry from around the Upper New York area and the world. For more news and stories visit: www.unyumc.org



The Upper New York Conference's vision is to live the gospel of Jesus Christ and to be God's love with our neighbors in all places.

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Special Session 2023:

A recap of disaffiliations in Upper New York

By Rev. Bill Gottschalk-Fielding
Assistant to the Bishop

On Oct. 14, 2023, a special session of Annual Conference ratified a final docket of 57 requests from churches to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church (UMC) under ¶ 2553 of *The Book of Discipline*. According to an unofficial tally maintained by United Methodist Communications (UMCom), around 6,500 disaffiliation requests have been ratified by conferences across the United States to date. Several more conferences will meet in special sessions to consider other requests before the limited right to disaffiliate provided in ¶ 2553 ends Dec. 31, 2023.

What United Methodists in Upper New York (UNY) and across the country are experiencing in terms of disaffiliations is unprecedented in the 55-year history of The United Methodist Church. While it is not possible at the moment to fully assess its impact, some basic facts can be shared.

Between October 2022 and October 2023, UNY Conference members ratified a total of 118 requests for disaffiliation:

- 8 in October 2022
- 18 in March 2023
- 35 in June 2023
- 57 in October 2023

The total number of disaffiliations was spread across all districts:

- Adirondack – 10
- Albany – 5
- Binghamton – 12
- Cornerstone – 24
- Crossroads – 5
- Finger Lakes – 7
- Genesee Valley – 8
- Mohawk – 11
- Mountain View – 13
- Niagara Frontier – 14
- Northern Flow – 4
- Oneonta – 5

The average worship attendance at the churches disaffiliating in 2022-23 was 39. Ten of these had an average worship attendance of 100 or more while over half worshipped with 25 or less on an average Sunday. The number of disaffiliations, therefore, represents a loss of about 15% of UNY's churches. Nationally, this places UNY in the bottom third of conferences in terms of percentage of churches disaffiliating.

Financial Impact

Church disaffiliations have significant financial implications for UNY. The anticipated revenue loss related to disaffiliations in 2024 is \$653,371. This loss was accounted for in the budget approved by Annual Conference back in May. For 2025, the anticipated loss is anticipated to be \$1,247,003. The UNY Council on

Finance and Administration (CFA) is already developing a ministry budget for 2025 that adapts to these anticipated realities.

Churches exiting UNY paid \$2,645,215 to offset their share of the anticipated unfunded pension liability. Exiting churches were also required to pay all current and overdue shared ministry payments, a sum equal to \$231,217. They also paid an additional \$1,478,220, an amount representing 12 extra months of shared ministry payments. All legal fees associated with disaffiliation were also paid by the exiting church.

Church Membership

Church membership numbers are also impacted by disaffiliations. When a church exits UNY, its clergy and laity must decide whether to follow the church or remain United Methodist. In The United Methodist Church, a clergy person's membership resides with the conference, not the local church. Therefore, even when a church chooses to disaffiliate, a pastor's discernment regarding their future relationship with The United Methodist Church is a separate matter.

The Episcopal Office asked pastors serving churches intending to disaffiliate whether they intended to continue serving in The United Methodist Church or would withdraw from the denomination to unite with another denomination or withdraw from the ministerial office. If a pastor indicated an intention to withdraw from The United Methodist Church, the decision would take effect when

the disaffiliation is finalized, which is the date the New York State court approves the disaffiliation and transfer of property. If a pastor indicated an intention to remain in The United Methodist Church, the cabinet will work to ensure continuation of compensation and consideration of another appointment. A disaffiliating church must pay its appointed clergy's compensation and benefits through the end of the appointment year immediately following the effective date of disaffiliation if the appointed clergy remains in The United Methodist Church and is unable to be appointed elsewhere.

Laity face similar choices about their membership. They may choose to follow their church out of the conference or remain United Methodist and transfer their membership to another United Methodist congregation. Because only members of UNY congregations are eligible to serve on conference boards, committees, commissions, and task forces, members who choose to remain with their church after disaffiliation are no longer eligible to serve on any conference agency.

Church members who wish to remain United Methodist are welcome at any other United Methodist church in the Conference. The Conference's "Safe Haven Congregations" initiative is designed to offer radical hospitality to anyone whose church has disaffiliated or closed.

