

State

Divided Georgia congregation illustrates United Methodist split

By SHELIA POOLE

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

ATLANTA — Kelly Garrett Glanton was christened at Carrollton First United Methodist Church in 1963.

Sixty years later, she watched her 3-month-old granddaughter get baptized in the family church.

Her granddaughter will probably be one of the last family members to be baptized at Carrollton First UMC, which voted to leave the denomination. Glanton and other members who want to stay United Methodist will meet elsewhere.

Carrollton First UMC is among 265 — or 38% — of churches in the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church that have voted to leave the denomination.

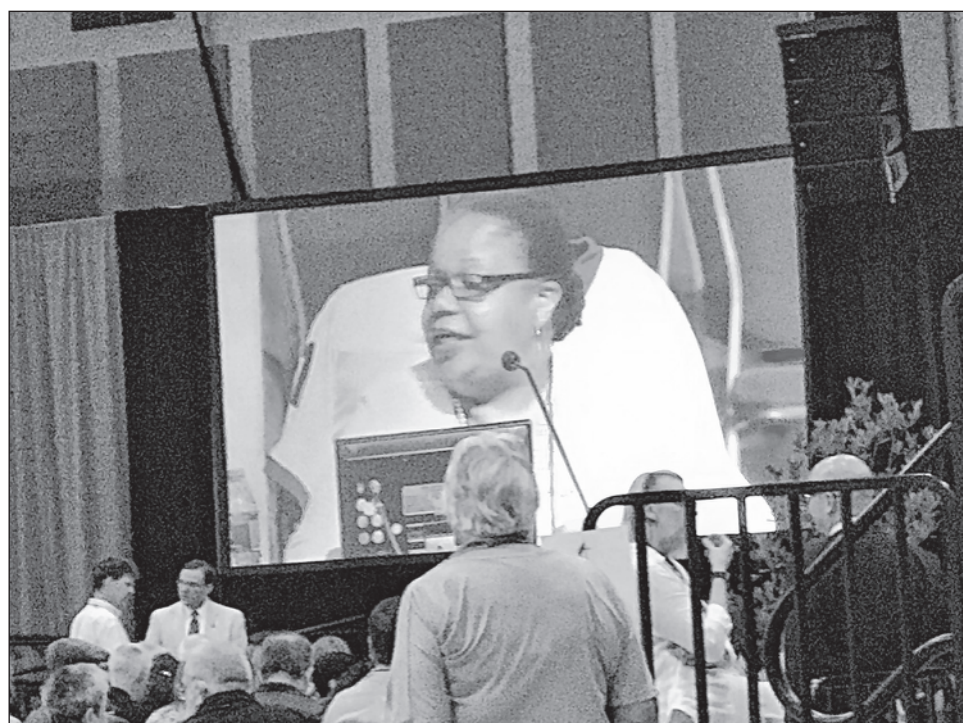
On Saturday, the North Georgia Conference will hold a special called session in Athens to ratify the disaffiliation requests, allowing those churches who want to leave the ability to do so.

The congregations that are leaving want to retain more-traditional tenets of the denomination. They take issue with the ordination of “practicing, self-avowed” gay clergy and performing same-sex marriage. Others are concerned that the denomination is becoming too progressive or they fear changes over biblical interpretation.

“It makes me sad,” said Glanton, 60. “It’s been the biggest heartbreak. Fear about what might happen becomes more important than relationships. That’s hard to get over.”

Many of the churches that have already disaffiliated have become independent or joined other Methodist denominations, including the more conservative Global Methodist Church.

The North Georgia Conference “is in a season of



Shelia Poole/The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Bishop Robin Dease presides over the three-day annual June meeting of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church at The Classic Center in Athens, Georgia.

pruning,” said Bishop Robin Dease in a statement. “No matter how painful the pruning might be, it is a way to make room for new life, new growth. It reminds us how God continues to work in and through us just like God works in all creation.”

Sybil Davidson, a spokeswoman for the North Georgia Conference, said, “Our hope is to move through this graciously and thoughtfully, treating each church equally. Our mission stays the same, who we are stays the same.”

The churches that leave the conference will fulfill certain financial obligations and depart with assets and property.

Of those leaving, most have on average fewer than 50 members.

Prior to Saturday’s action, the conference had 700 churches and about 320,000 lay members. Though numbers will shrink substantially, the North Georgia conference is already planting new churches and ministries in communities that have lost

churches.

Before reaching the conference level for a vote, local churches had to hold their own vote and receive a two-thirds majority of those present. Once the churches departing the denomination are ratified, the date of disaffiliation is Nov. 30, but churches still have 30 days to complete any requirements.

Glanton grew up in Carrollton First UMC. On some Sundays, there were four generations of her family in the pews of the white brick church, which has been in that location since 1904.

You can usually find her during services in the same pew she has sat in for years: third row on the left facing the pulpit near the organ.

She said the issue has been so divisive in the congregation that long-standing friendships have been affected.

“We existed for years and years as United Methodists, knowing that there were other members of our church family who didn’t agree with us

100%,” said Glanton, who is serving as leader of the transitional team and of new leadership.

She said some of her fellow congregants feared that at the next General Conference in 2024 in Charlotte, delegates would change wording in the Book of Discipline as it relates to LGBTQ inclusion, and that the denomination was becoming too progressive.

The Book of Discipline outlines the law, procedures, doctrine, administration and organizational work of the United Methodist Church.

Glanton doesn’t believe any local church would be forced to perform same-sex marriages. Personally, she is in favor of that language being removed but she would stay United Methodist even if it weren’t and “work for change” from the inside.

In 2019, during the UMC’s General Conference, which is held every four years, delegates approved a plan upholding and strengthening prohibi-

tions against the ordination of non-celibate LGBTQ clergy and performance of same-sex marriages.

“The day of the vote (to leave the denomination), I cried,” Glanton said. “My children cried. It was terrible for me and my family. Our church has been taken from us.”

Carrollton, along with nearly 190 other churches in the North Georgia Conference, sued the Conference and others, after the process to disaffiliate was temporarily paused. A Cobb County Superior Court judge ordered the conference to proceed with the process to allow those congregations to vote on whether or not to leave the denomination.

What conference leaders didn’t predict, though, was that even more churches would vote to leave.

“We’ll be smaller, that is for sure,” said the North Georgia Conference’s Davidson. “The conference has long been making plans to operate on a smaller budget and will continue living into that smaller budget.”

Among the largest churches by average worship attendance that plan to leave are Mt. Pisgah United Methodist Church in Johns Creek, Creekside United Methodist Church in Cumming and Alpharetta First United Methodist Church, according to the North Georgia Conference.

Anne Ball is one of the congregants who voted to disaffiliate.

Ball, a retired instructor at the University of West Georgia, said she and her husband struggled with how to vote.

Ball doesn’t think openly gay clergy should be ordained. And, while she doesn’t mind same-sex couples being married in a civil ceremony, she doesn’t think they should be married in the church. But she said that wasn’t her main reason for voting to leave.

A former delegate, Ball’s main issue was that she had lost confidence in the conference and denominational leadership.

Ball, who has been a member of the church for 57 years, was concerned about what she viewed as an emphasis on social and cultural issues rather than articles of faith.

“It’s heartbreaking for everyone,” she said. “Nobody wanted this.”

The Rev. Dr. Robert C. Brown, senior pastor of Carrollton First UMC, and those who wanted to remain in the denomination soon will begin holding services at nearby “Mighty” Moore’s Chapel UMC about three blocks away. It’s a predominantly Black congregation and the two churches have had a long-standing relationship.

They will initially hold separate worship services in Moore’s Christian Life Center.

The name of the new congregation will be changed to Community First United Methodist Church. “We will offer God’s grace and forgiveness and leave judgment to God. Everyone will be seen, heard, valued and invited to participate fully.”

These last few Sundays, he has looked out into the pews where people have been members of Carrollton First UMC for decades and generations.

“I’m feeling very hopeful about the future, but my heart is heavy and grieving because of the relationships that have been irrevocably broken,” said Brown.

Rev. Edward J. Landrum, pastor of Moore’s Chapel and president of the Carrollton Ministerial Coalition, said his church decided to stay United Methodist.

“My heart breaks and I’m sure it breaks God’s heart about what the Church is going through right now,” he said.

Georgia prosecutors request August trial date for Trump

By TAMAR HALLERMAN

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

ATLANTA — Prosecutors are asking a Fulton County judge to schedule Donald Trump’s election interference trial on Aug. 5, 2024 — three months before the general election.

A lawyer for the former president immediately objected to the proposed timetable and asked the judge to schedule a hearing on the issue.

In a court filing on Friday afternoon, District Attorney Fani Willis said the proposed trial date “balances potential delays from defendant Trump’s other criminal trials in sister sovereigns and the other defendants’ constitutional speedy trial rights.”

If Fulton Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee agrees, that means Willis’ sprawling racketeering case against Trump and 14 others would go to trial three weeks after the Republican Party selects its nominee for president at its convention in Milwaukee. Trump has held a demanding lead in the polls since he announced his third run for the presidency. If granted, the trial would take place nearly a year after Willis first indicted Trump and his allies for allegedly conspiring to overturn Joe Biden’s win in Georgia.

Trump’s top Atlanta attorney, Steve Sadow, on Friday asked McAfee for “the opportunity to present oral argument in opposition to the motion at a hearing to be held at a time convenient to the court.”

Trump is scheduled to appear in a Washington, D.C., courtroom in early March for his federal election subversion trial. His Manhattan case involving alleged hush money payments to the porn star Stormy Daniels is scheduled for trial in late March. Trump’s federal classified documents

trial has been scheduled for May 2024 in Florida, but the judge in that case recently indicated the timeline is likely to slip.

Willis had initially requested that the Fulton trial for Trump and his co-defendants begin in March 2024. But that timeline changed when two defendants, Sidney Powell and Kenneth Chesebro, demanded speedy trials. Both Powell and Chesebro have since cut plea deals with prosecutors, as have two other co-defendants.

During an appearance at a Washington Post Live event this week, Willis said she believed the trial would take “many months.”

“I don’t expect that we will conclude until the winter or the very early part of 2025,” she estimated, adding that she expected the verdict would be appealed.

Prosecutors previously said they had upward of 150 witnesses they planned to call for the case. Jury selection is expected to be long.

The DA’s office also on Friday asked that McAfee keep the remaining 15 defendants together as one group for now and not entertain any so-called “severance” motions, which would divide the defendants into groups for multiple trials, until after a proposed June 21, 2024 deadline for final plea deals.

“The RICO conspiracy charge ensures any trial would share the same evidence and witnesses,” prosecutors wrote. “In a case where the same witnesses, the same evidence and the same charges would be used against all defendants — thus affecting judicial economy in the use of physical facilities and the time of witnesses, jurors, and court personnel — the trial court must consider these efficiencies against the possible conflicting interests of joint or multiple defendants.”

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