

Popular bishop moves from 'extreme center' of UMC to new Global Methodist Church

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#)

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Bishop Scott Jones speaks before the United Methodist Judicial Council, the denomination's top court, on May 22, 2018. (Photo by Kathleen Barry/United Methodist News Service)

Scott Jones isn't the first United Methodist bishop to join the Global Methodist Church since the theologically conservative denomination launched in May, but his exit from the UMC has arguably caused the greatest stir.

That's partly because of the unique position his family holds in Methodism and the "extreme center" position he had staked out within the United Methodist Church.

For some, it also casts a different light on his retirement, just days before he joined the GMC, as head of the Texas Annual Conference where about half of its churches—more than any other conference in the United Methodist Church—likewise left the denomination.

“The Jones family is truly one of the first families of Methodism in our church,” said Will Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop and a professor of the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Willimon added, “This family has been a family of leaders of our church, and it’s such a shock to have one of the members of the family leading churches out of our church.”

Jones’s late father, S. Jameson Jones, Jr., was president of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver and then dean of Duke Divinity School—two United Methodist schools.

His brother, L. Gregory Jones, now the president of Belmont University, previously served as dean of Duke Divinity School, arguably Methodism’s premier seminary.

And one of his three children, Arthur Jones, is senior pastor of a United Methodist Church: St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Plano, Texas, which is currently negotiating to leave the UMC.

Both Arthur Jones and Greg Jones declined to be interviewed for this article.

Scott Jones wrote his dissertation on the history of biblical interpretation and John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, because, he said, “I recognized that how Christians interpret the Bible is the most controversial question in Christianity today.”

That question is at the heart of a controversy that has haunted the United Methodist Church for decades and has led to the current split: whether to ordain and marry LGBTQ Christians.

In 2020, delegates to the global UMC’s General Conference were expected to consider a proposal to split the denomination, but the meeting was subsequently delayed three times due to the pandemic. After the third pushback to 2024, the Global Methodist Church, which is against ordaining LGBTQ clergy and marrying same-sex couples, split from the United Methodist Church earlier this year.

Jones—who pastored several congregations in Texas and taught at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University before he was elected bishop in 2004—had previously positioned himself in what he calls the “extreme center,” a phrase he said he first encountered in *The Economist*.

He wanted to convey how Methodist doctrine holds in tension things other Christians may see as contradictory, such as evangelism and social action.

After reaching out to the magazine to make sure it wasn’t trademarked, Jones said, he wrote it into the title of his 2002 book *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, his [social media presence](#), and his [website](#).

Methodist doctrine is “conservative in some ways and liberal in other ways; it occupies the extreme center and is totally opposed to the dead center,” he explained in his 2008 book, *Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodists*, in which he argued the debate over homosexuality was “a symptom of deeper disagreements,” including Christology, ecclesiology, and authority of scripture.

Alongside essays from a diverse group of United Methodist leaders, he wrote that he believed the denomination should not split.

“Now, years later, I realized that my hope and my dream turned out not to be possible because the church has in fact, split this last year,” Jones said in an interview. “But it was a desire to try to do whatever I could to hold it together and point the way forward. It just didn’t work.”

It didn’t work, he said, because some church leaders and regional conferences have [taken action](#) to oppose the denomination’s official stance barring LGBTQ members from ordination and marriage.

“These doctrinal and moral disobedience questions have made it hard to keep the idea that we really are a church following the same Book of Discipline,” he said.

In June, after more than 18 years as a bishop, he [announced](#) he was retiring from the United Methodist Church. But, Jones said, he thought he might have a few more years of “good service to Christ” and wanted to go where he was most needed.

In the meantime, he said, he continued helping churches in the Texas Annual Conference discern whether to remain United Methodist or join the Global Methodist

Church, recording videos, writing articles, and leading decision-making processes. Either was a great option, he said.

“I think God has a great future for the United Methodist Church. God also has a great future for the Global Methodist Church, and people needed to decide which place could they best serve Christ,” he said.

On vacation for the last few weeks of December, he said it was time for his own discernment.

On the last day of 2022, nine days after his retirement, he joined the Global Methodist Church as an elder and bishop in the fledgling denomination.

The move touched a nerve with Methodists.

Keith Boyette, who heads the Global Methodist Church as its transitional connectional officer, said [in a statement](#) at the time that the GMC was “rejoicing over God’s good grace to us,” calling Jones a “tremendous blessing” to the new denomination.

In an interview, Boyette said he commends Jones for creating a “fair playing field” for churches and clergy to discern whether to stay in or leave the United Methodist Church, though he understands others might be critical.

David Donnan—pastor of Glennville Methodist Church, a Global Methodist congregation in Glennville, Georgia—penned a blog post titled, “[Why Scott Jones is a Bigger Deal than You Think.](#)”

“By moving he is demonstrating how his views align better in the Global Methodist Church. This (is) more than any person moving. This is the extreme center poster child himself moving out,” Donnan wrote.

Others were skeptical of the timing.

In his own post, which came in the form of a satirical video on his Picklin’ Parson YouTube page titled “[Dear Bishop: What Took You So Long?](#),” Stan Copeland of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church in Dallas said he wasn’t surprised.

Copeland had already [raised the alarm](#) about Jones and two other bishops he said had provided “promotion and support” to the Global Methodist Church, all the while

being paid by the UMC.

The Texas Annual Conference, once one of the strongest conferences in the UMC, has lost 302 of its nearly 600 churches since 2019, [according to United Methodist Church data](#). That doesn't happen if a bishop is presenting neutral information, Copeland said.

Jones then retired—with benefits, Copeland stressed—before joining the new denomination himself.

“I think when he wrote those books, he really believed in an extreme center, but he's extreme right of center now,” he said.

Boyette said Jones had been part of the 2020 gathering that [produced a statement](#) outlining a vision for what became the Global Methodist Church, but they had not discussed any potential role for the bishop within the denomination until after Jones retired.

The bishop was “very insistent on observing those appropriate boundaries,” said Boyette.

Jones maintains he provided a process that allowed clergy and local churches to make “a genuine discernment.”

“And I provided high quality, accurate information that helped people see what was going on,” he said. “For example, I said the United Methodist Church is going to be moving in a progressive direction over the next several years. The only question is how far will it go and how fast? I was criticized for telling people that, but I believe it's the truth.”

Jones and [Bishop Mark Webb](#), who left the United Methodist Church just before him, are tasked with overseeing all the congregations in the Global Methodist Church—about 1,100, [as of mid-January](#).

A third retired United Methodist bishop, [Bishop Emeritus Mike Lowry](#), had joined the new denomination's Transitional Leadership Council ahead of its launch.

The Global Methodist Church's nine provisional annual conferences and districts are now holding [convening gatherings](#). By the time its three Texas conferences—Mid-Texas, Great Plains, and Eastern Texas—finished meeting earlier this month, Jones

said they had ordained about 120 new clergy and received a number of United Methodist clergy, who can transfer their credentials to the new denomination.

It's difficult to build something from scratch, the bishop said, but he believes the Global Methodist Church has a lot of potential.

"It's exciting to be in a community of people who are focused on worshipping passionately, loving extravagantly and witnessing boldly. I love that mission statement and look forward to being a part of it," he said.

At the same time, he wishes the best for the denomination that was his home for so long.

"They can reach people that the Global Methodist Church will never reach, and that's a good thing." —Religion News Service