

Responding to UMC disaffiliations, global Methodist council sets membership rules

by [Heather Hahn](#)

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United Methodist Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett, the newly elected president of the World Methodist Council, leads a meeting of council delegates on August 18. Sitting beside Wallace-Padgett are (from left) newly elected treasurer Myron Howie of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, newly elected general secretary Reynaldo Leão Neto of the Methodist Church in Britain, and newly elected vice president Joshua Rathnam of the Church of North India. (Photo by Heather Hahn, UM News)

The United Methodist Church's splintering has prompted Methodism's ecumenical association to formalize its guidelines for admitting new members.

"In cases where an applicant church was historically part of a World Methodist Council member church, the Officers shall engage in conversation with both parties," says [the new Guidelines for Membership document](#) adopted by the council when it met August. 18.

Applicants also must explain why they want to be part of the council and share the status of their existing ecumenical relations. The officers will then recommend to the

full council whether to accept the applicant as a new member.

The formalized membership guidelines come as departures from the World Methodist Council's largest member, the United Methodist Church, have led to the launch of new breakaway denominations and [already have shaken up some relationships within the wider Wesleyan family](#).

[The World Methodist Council](#) took up the membership guidelines at a meeting after the closing worship of its 22nd World Methodist Conference. Unlike the festive August 14-18 conference—[which was primarily a time of fellowship and worship](#)—the council meeting that followed was almost all business. Over three hours, about 200 voting delegates from six continents adopted statements on a range of international and religious issues including calling for a permanent ceasefire in the occupied Palestinian Territories.

The membership guidelines sought to address concerns closer to home.

Retired United Methodist Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, who helped draft the guidelines, stressed that what the ecumenical body approved was basically the same application process the ecumenical body had long been using. But at the prompting of United Methodist bishops, the World Methodist Council's membership guidelines are now written down.

"We saw it as an affirmation to help clarify a process that is in place already," said Wenner. She serves a part-time role as one of two ecumenical officers for the United Methodist Council of Bishops. She also is the Geneva secretary for the World Methodist Council.

The ecumenical body, founded in 1881, is a worldwide association of [some 80 denominations with Methodist heritage representing more than 80 million members in 138 countries](#).

"Through the Council," the membership guidelines say, "Churches whose roots are traced to the Wesleyan movement in the 18th century connect by listening to and learning from one another, offering mutual encouragement and engaging in united witness in the ministry of making disciples of Jesus Christ."

The UMC—[with more than 9 million members of its own on four continents](#)—is both the council's largest member denomination and, by far, its biggest financial

contributor. But over the past few years the UMC has undergone a separation of sorts after decades of intensifying debate over LGBTQ people's inclusion in the church. Since 2019, nearly 7,900 US congregations—including 218 this summer—have received the necessary approvals to leave the UMC with property.

As all this has been developing, the Global Methodist Church—a theologically conservative breakaway denomination—also has been getting off the ground. The Global Methodist Church, [organized by conservative United Methodist advocacy groups that back bans on same-sex marriage and gay clergy](#), launched in May 2022 and has been recruiting mainly from the United Methodist fold ever since.

As of May this year, the Global Methodist Church said it had about 4,500 congregations. The new denomination plans to hold its convening conference later this month in Costa Rica.

However, United Methodist bishops [have denounced some of the new denomination's recruitment tactics](#), which the bishops said failed to acknowledge United Methodists as fellow Christians. Leaders of the Global Methodist Church and advocacy groups, the Wesleyan Covenant Association and Good News, have insisted they do see United Methodists as fellow Christians.

But even now, [legal disputes continue](#) over church property in Nigeria, where [former bishop John Wesley Yohanna resigned](#) with his cabinet in July to join the Global Methodist Church. [On behalf of a large portion of the country's United Methodists](#), 995 Nigerian delegates recently voted to remain in the UMC.

With the ongoing friction in mind, the World Methodist Council sought input from the United Methodist Council of Bishops when Global Methodist leadership approached the ecumenical body about possible observer status.

[The Council of Bishops responded](#), saying it “encourages all requests from those applying for membership in the World Methodist Council when those applying mutually recognize all churches in the WMC as valid Christian expressions and as valid expressions of the Wesleyan Tradition.”

While the new World Methodist Council membership document makes no direct mention of mutual recognition, it does spell out the commonalities its members should share, including having a doctrine in keeping with the traditional standards of Methodist doctrine and being a national, regional, or global church.

No one from the Global Methodist Church attended the World Methodist Conference. However, Larry Duggins of the new Methodist Collegiate Church denomination was among the more than 1,000 people at the conference. The MCC has just started the application process to join the World Methodist Council.

White's Chapel in Southlake, Texas, near Fort Worth, started the MCC as it was disaffiliating from the UMC in 2023. Today, Duggins said the new denomination includes seven former United Methodist churches in Texas and Louisiana as well as about 70 former United Methodist churches in Kenya, Congo, and Uganda.

Even with their exit from the UMC, he said members of the new denomination want to maintain ties.

"We had a conservative congregation, and so because of that, we ended up needing to take the conservative views on the human sexuality issue," Duggins said. "But that didn't mean that we wanted to throw away our connection with everybody who disagreed."

In other parts of the world, United Methodists conferences are in various stages in the process of departing after this year's general conference [eliminated decades-old denomination-wide bans on "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy and same-sex marriage](#).

United Methodists in the Eurasian countries of Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan [have received the general conference's blessing to leave and form the autonomous Christian Methodist Church early next year](#).

The United Methodist conferences in Côte d'Ivoire and Czechia (also known as the Czech Republic) are still preparing their departure. Before the departures become official, the conferences will likewise need approval by the next General Conference, scheduled in 2028.

The Côte d'Ivoire Conference plans [to return to being an autonomous Methodist denomination](#), and the [Czech conference has not yet determined](#) whether it will become autonomous or join another Methodist church.

The Swedish United Methodists followed this same process about a dozen years ago [to form the Uniting Church in Sweden](#), which hosted the recent World Methodist Conference with assistance from United Methodists in neighboring Denmark and

Norway.

Like the Swedish church, these exiting conferences might also become denominations eligible for membership in the World Methodist Council and thus maintain connection with the extended Methodist family.

United Methodist Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett, who is just beginning a five-year term as the World Methodist Council's president, described that connection as crucial to the ecumenical association's ministry. Wallace-Padgett is the bishop of the UMC's Holston and West Virginia conferences.

"There is quite a reach that we have in this world Methodist movement," she told the council meeting. "To build on that and to develop new initiatives in response to the needs of the world and the leadership of the Holy Spirit will be significant, and that is my hope and prayer." —UM News