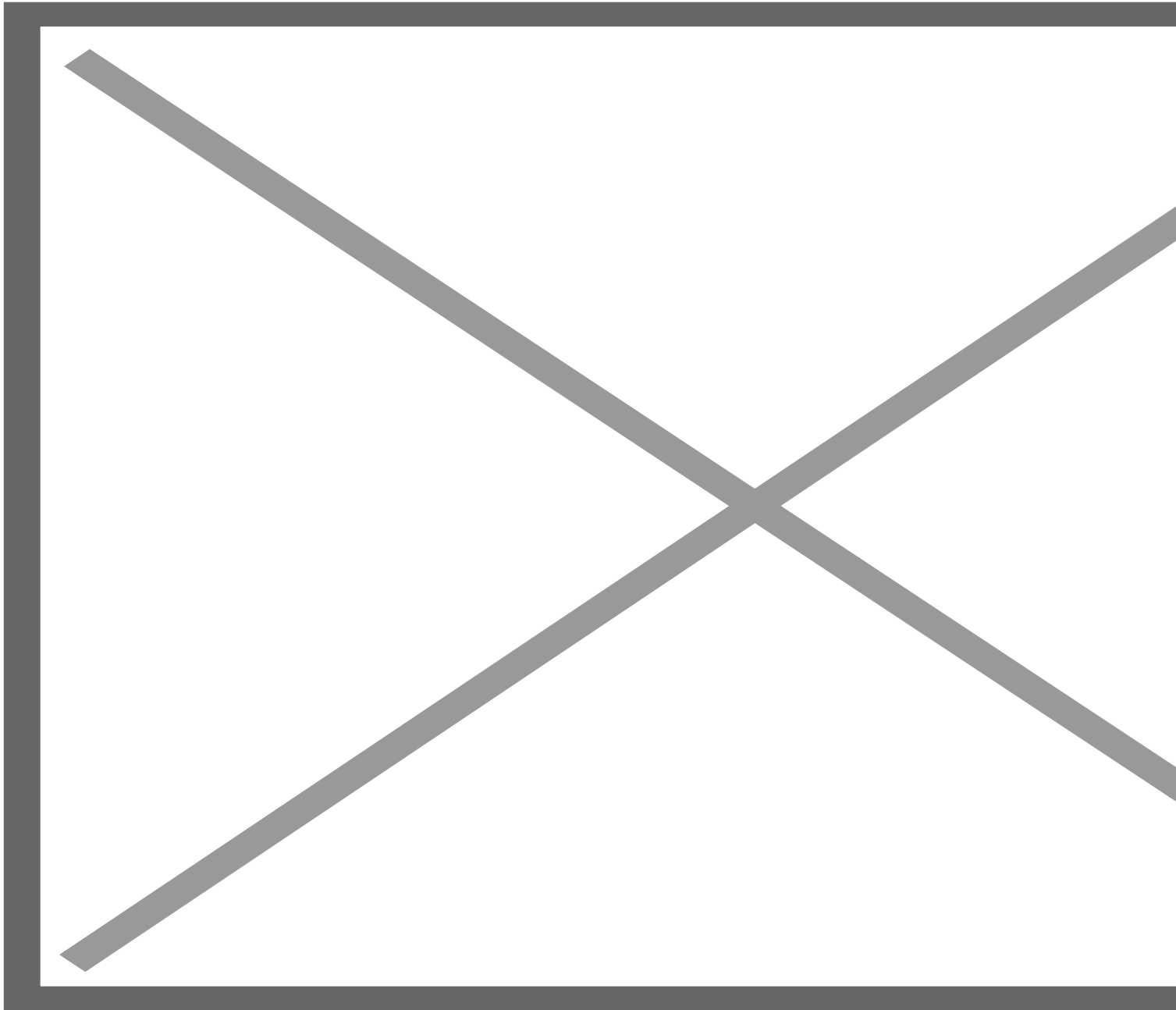


Texas UMC conference sues its largest congregation

by [Heather Hahn](#)

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(via LinkedIn)

The United Methodist Church's Horizon Texas Conference is suing Highland Park United Methodist Church—claiming the Dallas megachurch improperly moved to end oversight by the denomination and its own congregants.

The dispute deals with changes Highland Park's church council made in 2022 to the congregation's articles of incorporation and bylaws, including altering the church's legal documents to concentrate sole authority in the church council, changing the corporation's name to Highland Park Methodist Church, and removing all references to the United Methodist Church from its governing documents.

Since October 2025—when conference leadership learned of the changes—the conference and church leaders have engaged in private discussions to try to resolve their differences. On August 10, after those discussions broke down, the conference filed a lawsuit in state civil court, challenging the changes.

Ultimately, the conference said it is seeking to ensure that the governing documents are back to being consistent with the Book of Discipline, which contains the denomination's rules for church administration.

“Our purpose is restoration—bringing the original governance structure back into alignment with the Book of Discipline so this church can move forward faithfully,” said Horizon Texas Conference Bishop Rubén Saenz Jr., who is also president of the denomination's Council of Bishops.

Matt Tuggle, senior minister of Highland Park United Methodist Church, said in a statement that the church has been faithfully United Methodist and has always supported United Methodist leadership.

“For the Horizon Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church to file a meritless lawsuit against our church is both bewildering and disappointing,” he said. “While we continue to engage with the conference on its allegations, we will remain focused on being *who we are* as a church—which means ministering to our congregation just as we have over the past 110 years.”

In [a video the church released August 12](#), Tuggle said that he and fellow congregational leaders “were completely blindsided” by the lawsuit.

“The bishop says that in times of disagreement, we're called to treat one another with honesty, humility, care and grace, and we agree on that,” Tuggle said in the video. “And that is how we have chosen to behave throughout this process, and how we will continue to approach this process with integrity, confidence, and faith. And I have great confidence that with God's steadfast hand, this matter will ultimately be resolved, and God's will will be done.”

Highland Park United Methodist Church, which began on the Southern Methodist University campus 110 years ago, has more than 15,000 members. It is the largest United Methodist congregation in the conference and the state of Texas. Over the years, the church has counted some prominent people among its membership including former US President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura.

To this day, the church identifies as Highland Park United Methodist Church on both its entrance sign and website. Earlier this year, Highland Park United Methodist also continued its tradition of hosting the graduation ceremony for SMU's Perkins School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary. In the video, Tuggle said the church “has continued to honor all of our commitments to the conference, including our financial contributions, making payments as recently as last week.”

The conference said its concern is not that a local church has articles of incorporation or bylaws but that the local corporate documents assign sole authority to local church bodies in areas governed by the Book of Discipline.

“As your bishop, I have a moral responsibility to the Highland Park congregation and the wider United Methodist Church to uphold the order of the United Methodist Church and to protect the sacred trust that generations of United Methodists have entrusted to this congregation,” Saenz said in [a video statement](#).

Tuggle, in the video, said the church has done everything “by the book” and in accordance with Texas law. He said that the changes the church made to its corporate documents are in line with guidance from Texas court decisions in 2020.

Tuggle did not specify the court decisions he was referencing. But in 2020, [the Texas Supreme Court sided with the majority of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth](#) in the majority’s withdrawal from the Episcopal Church. At issue in that case was what constituted the Fort Worth diocese: The withdrawing majority or the new leadership the Episcopal Church named after a majority of the previous leaders and their churches withdrew?

The state court ruled that “under the governing documents, the withdrawing faction is the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth” and thus could keep all church property. That’s because all parties involved had arranged the diocese’s affairs so that a majority of the diocese controlled its association, the court said. The decision added that the diocesan trust never required affiliation with the Episcopal Church.

The United Methodist Church is set up differently. Going back to the 18th century, the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church and its predecessors has included a trust clause, which states that church property is held in trust “[for the benefit of the entire denomination.](#)”

Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, [introduced the first trust clause](#), and US civil courts have repeatedly recognized it when dealing with church property disputes under neutral principles of law.

A temporary disaffiliation policy allowed churches a limited release from the trust clause if they met certain conditions including two-thirds majority support from the congregation. But that policy has since expired, and the 2024 general conference took the step of removing it from the Discipline entirely. That year’s general conference also removed longtime, denomination-wide bans on same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay clergy. But those changes did not appear to affect the church much.

In [a video immediately after the lawmaking assembly](#), Paul Rasmussen, who was then senior pastor at Highland, announced that he was exercising [his right under the Discipline](#) not to hold same-sex weddings at the church. However, he added other pastors on staff could choose to officiate at same-sex weddings at other venues. He also celebrated [the elimination of a 52-year-old statement in the Discipline](#) calling “the practice of homosexuality. . . incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Tuggle concluded his August 12 video by asking members to pray for the congregation, its leaders and the conference leadership.

“We are going to keep being the church that God has called us to be,” Tuggle said, “and we are going to keep doing what God has called us to do, both on this street corner and from the street corner.”

Saenz said he and other conference leaders absolutely support Highland Park continuing its customs and ministries.

“The conference’s position is not that Highland Park must surrender its identity, traditions, or distinctive approach to ministry,” the bishop said. “The conference’s concern is limited to the church’s governing documents and decisions that were made about the congregation’s governance and denominational standing without transparency and without following the process required of every United Methodist church.” —United Methodist News