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# Maine congregations break away from United Methodist Church over LGBTQ policies

HopeGateWay, a community of faith in Portland, voted recently in favor of disaffiliation, joining congregations on Peaks Island, Chebeague Island and in Cumberland that have taken the same step.



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Ophelia Hu Kinney is a member of HopeGateWay, one of four area congregations that have voted to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church over its policies about sexuality and discrimination against the LGBTQ community. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

When Ophelia Hu Kinney and her wife moved to Portland in 2016, they found themselves at home at HopeGateWay, a community of faith that grew from the roots of the former Chestnut Street United Methodist Church.

Hu Kinney felt HopeGateWay, which was affiliated with the United Methodist Church, had put to rest questions about queer and trans inclusion and was focusing on the larger community, social justice and spiritual formation.

“It was refreshing and life-giving to be part of a church that focused on so much more,” said Hu Kinney, who lives in Scarborough and is the church’s worship coordinator.

But at the same time, the United Methodist Church was becoming more conservative and, in 2019, affirmed policies that Hu Kinney and many others have decried as discriminatory against LGBTQ church members and clergy. That was a breaking point for HopeGateWay and other local churches focused on being affirming and inclusive in worship.

Members of HopeGateWay voted overwhelmingly on March 28 to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church, joining three other local congregations that have taken the same step. They are among the first half-dozen or so congregations in the country to go through a long, and at times emotional, process to break away from the denomination and denounce policies that had grown more conservative in recent years.

Brackett Memorial United Methodist Church, now known as New Brackett Church, on Peaks Island was the first congregation in Maine and the second in the country to take the step when its members voted unanimously last August to leave the United Methodist Church. Chebeague Island UMC and

Tuttle Road UMC in Cumberland voted in February and March in favor of disaffiliation.

The history of the four churches is connected to the Chestnut Street Methodist Church in Portland, which has been called “The Mother of Maine Methodism,” according to the Maine Historical Society. A number of offshoot churches – including the ones in Cumberland and on Peaks and Chebeague islands – grew from that parent church between 1842 and 1856.

“Since the early 1970s, the United Methodist Church has been on a trajectory to being more conservative. One of the most significant ways that is expressed is in anti-gay policies. The policies got worse and worse each year,” said Rev. Will Green, pastor of the New Brackett Church. “We find it’s an offense to what we believe about God, about the community and about the world. The world is noticing the United Methodist Church is so anti-gay. We can put out our pride flags and try to create change, but at the end of the day we didn’t belong in the United Methodist Church.”

In 2019, the four congregations were among nearly a dozen across New England that announced the start of a process of discernment, indicating that their understanding of human sexuality and God’s inclusive love is in direct and potentially irreconcilable conflict with the policies and practices of the United Methodist Church.

Currently, ordained pastors in the United Methodist Church are not allowed to perform same-sex marriages, risking disciplinary action if they do, and “practicing” LGBTQ people cannot become ordained pastors, according to

the church's book of discipline. The church does not recognize or celebrate same-sex marriages, a ban that was reaffirmed in 2019.

Members of the 13-million-person United Methodist Church have been at odds for decades over same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy, with members in the United States leading the call for full inclusion of LGBTQ people. The issue came to a head when church leaders from around the world met in St. Louis in 2019 for a special conference where delegates voted 438-384 for a proposal called the Traditional Plan, which affirmed bans on LGBTQ-inclusive practices. A majority of U.S.-based delegates opposed the plan, but they were outvoted by U.S. conservatives teamed with most of the delegates from Africa and the Philippines.

“The fall-out for queer and trans people was enormous. It meant an immediate introduction of stricter penalties for performing weddings and potentially throwing people out of the church,” said Hu Kinney, who was at the conference for her job with Reconciling Ministries Network, an organization that seeks inclusion for all sexual orientations and gender identities in the United Methodist Church. “The overwhelming sense in St. Louis was one of despair.”

But at the same time, the United Methodist Church also decided to allow congregations that didn't agree with the church policies to leave.



The Rev. Sara Ewing-Merrill, center, the pastor of HopeGateWay, is flanked by church members Ophelia Hu Kinney, left, and Erin Bruce. HopeGateWay is one of four local congregations that recently voted to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church over its policies about sexuality and discrimination against the LGBTQ community. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

The moved toward disaffiliation came quickly at Tuttle Road United Methodist Church in Cumberland, where members had decided three years earlier to become a reconciling congregation and make a statement that all gay and lesbian people were welcome despite the stance of the denomination, said Pastor Linda Brewster. They were disappointed by the 2019 vote that affirmed exclusion of LGBTQ people, she said.

“Our congregation had really reached an end with the United Methodist Church,” said Brewster, noting that many members are lifelong Methodists. “Their heart for being inclusive and loving all people, and being fair and just

in the way we live our lives, overrode their heritage with the Methodist church.”

To disaffiliate, the congregations in Maine had to engage in an eight-month-long discernment process to explore the impacts of the decision to leave the United Methodist Church. That included coming up with something similar to a divorce agreement that must be approved by the United Methodist Church and paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to settle with the denomination, which owns all of the buildings.

“We’ve been living in this tension for a long time of being a fully open and affirming community” despite the denomination’s policies, said the Rev. Sara Ewing-Merrill, the pastor of HopeGateWay.

Ewing-Merrill said the majority of the weddings she has performed since joining the Portland church have been for same-sex couples, an action that put her at risk of having charges brought against her by the United Methodist Church, being put on trial and losing her status in the church. That had become a burden for her, she said, but also for the LGBTQ members of the church.

“It became clear we needed to be free from that system,” she said.

Gloria Brown, a layperson who serves on the Chebeague church’s administrative council, said the process has been a long one and won’t be final until after a vote by the denomination’s annual conference in June. The

local churches also need to pay off financial obligations to the United Methodist Church to retain control of their buildings.

“It’s been very much a social justice issue for us,” Brown said. “Sometimes it feels like it’s all about the money because we have to pay off these obligations or it’s all about the buildings because we have a trust clause we have to get through. But at the root of the whole thing is the social justice issue of inclusive worship and full participation by LBTGQIA+ people.”

The financial obligations are significant. Ewing-Merrill said her church will need to pay the United Methodist Church more than \$350,000 as part of its agreement to disaffiliate. On Peaks Island, the church had to pay about \$200,000, which was more than the annual budget. Green, the pastor, said the church took out a loan and received generous support from the community to meet its financial obligation.

The price was worth it, Green said.

“It’s been wonderful. It’s very exciting and renewing and uplifting,” he said. “It has really brought us together and energized us for the future. People are so happy and hopeful and ready.”

Members of HopeGateWay are also feeling hopeful, even as the church waits for a final vote from the annual conference in June and works through the process of forming a new church.

Erin Bruce, a 20-year-old college student from Gray, welcomes the changes. Bruce, who is bisexual, didn’t participate in many of the conversations about



disaffiliation because she didn't want to debate the issue. For her, it was clearly the right thing to do for a congregation where she always felt safe and accepted. She tried not to pay too much attention when one person voted against disaffiliation.

“Of course I wanted to disaffiliate. If I'm going to be a Methodist, I don't want to be part of a broader institution that will restrict my rights as a gay person,” she said.

Hu Kinney said she, too, felt relief by the overwhelming vote to leave the United Methodist Church.

“I had faith the members of our community would ultimately make the right choice even though it would come with a lot of mourning afterward and through the process,” Hu Kinney said. “This comes with a very hefty price tag. The message the church was sending to LGBTQ folks was you're worth it and we don't have to make excuses anymore. ... You're worth two years of discussion. You're worth it and we're willing to pay the price for it.”