

FLORIDA FIRST DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL

First United Methodist Church of Hobe Sound, Florida, Inc. v. The Board of Trustees of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Inc.

No. 1D2023-1048 · No. No. 1D2023-1048 · Decided April 8, 2026

SUMMARY

The First District Court of Appeal affirmed dismissal of claims brought by local United Methodist churches seeking to invalidate the denomination’s trust clause and retain property after disaffiliation. The court held that Florida’s hierarchical-deference approach barred judicial resolution of the intra-church property dispute and rejected the churches’ constitutional challenge to that approach. The court certified a question of great public importance to the Florida Supreme Court concerning whether such disputes may instead be resolved under neutral principles of law.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Florida First District Court of Appeal
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Nordby, J.; Lewis, J.; M.K. Thomas, J.
JURISDICTION	Florida First District Court of Appeal
DECIDED	April 8, 2026
DOCKET	No. 1D2023-1048
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from dismissal of an amended complaint asserting state-law challenges to the United Methodist Church's Trust Clause and disaffiliation provisions, fiduciary-duty claims, and an accounting claim.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The opinion does not expressly identify a standard-of-review label; it reviewed the trial court's dismissal and the applicability of the hierarchical-deference doctrine as legal questions.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published
PARTIES	First United Methodist Church of Hobe Sound, Florida, Inc., et al. v. The Board of Trustees of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Inc., et al.

TOPICS

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Florida courts must apply the hierarchical-deference approach when adjudicating state-law claims arising from an intra-church property dispute involving a hierarchical church.
2. Whether the appellants' challenge to the United Methodist Church's Trust Clause could be resolved under neutral principles of law rather than through deference to the church's highest ecclesiastical tribunal.
3. Whether application of the hierarchical-deference doctrine violated the First Amendment's Establishment Clause by favoring hierarchical churches over congregational churches.
4. Whether the appellants' unpreserved equal-protection and due-process challenges could be considered for the first time on appeal.

HOLDINGS

1. Florida courts remain governed by the hierarchical-deference approach when resolving property disputes arising within hierarchical churches. Because the United Methodist Church is hierarchical and the appellants are local churches affiliated with that hierarchy, the courts could not adjudicate the appellants' claims challenging the Church's internal resolution of the disaffiliation and property dispute.
2. The hierarchical-deference approach applies when the court determines first that the religious institution is hierarchical and second that the local church is affiliated with and subordinate to that hierarchy.
3. The appellants failed to establish that Florida's hierarchical-deference doctrine violates the Establishment Clause by impermissibly favoring hierarchical churches over congregational churches.
4. The court declined to consider the appellants' equal-protection and due-process challenges because they were not raised below.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“First Amendment values are plainly jeopardized when church property litigation is made to turn on the resolution by civil courts of controversies over religious doctrine and practice.” (at 5)

“the First Amendment does not dictate that a State must follow a particular method of resolving church property disputes.” (at 7)

“But this Court is jurisdictionally incapable of forcing UMC to apply one provision of its governing document over another.” (at 10)

“Because the hierarchical deference approach remains the applicable standard governing Florida courts’ consideration of property disputes arising from within hierarchical churches, we affirm the trial court’s

dismissal of Appellants' claims." (at 14)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The appellants are local churches affiliated with the hierarchical United Methodist Church and sought to disaffiliate while retaining their real property. The United Methodist Church's 2019 amendments to its Book of Discipline required disaffiliating churches to proceed under paragraph 2553 and pay a sum set by the Annual Conference to retain their property. The Church's highest internal judicial body determined that paragraph 2553, rather than paragraph 2548.2, supplied the exclusive disaffiliation route. The local churches then sued, claiming that the Trust Clause violated Florida trust and conveyance statutes and asserting fiduciary-duty and accounting claims.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Appellants sought to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church while retaining church property and challenged the governing Discipline's Trust Clause and disaffiliation provisions. The trial court concluded that Florida's hierarchical-deference doctrine barred adjudication of the claims and alternatively held that the local action rule barred the challenge to the Trust Clause. The court dismissed the amended complaint, and the First District affirmed while certifying a question of great public importance to the Florida Supreme Court.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Serbian Eastern Orthodox Diocese for the United States of America and Canada v. Milivojevich, 426 U.S. 696 (1976)
- Presbyterian Church v. Hull Church, 393 U.S. 440 (1969)
- Watson v. Jones, 80 U.S. 679 (1872)
- New Jerusalem Church of God, Inc. v. Sneads Community Church, Inc., 147 So. 3d 25 (Fla. 1st DCA 2013)
- Kedroff v. St. Nicholas Cathedral of Russian Orthodox Church in North America, 344 U.S. 94 (1952)
- Jones v. Wolf, 443 U.S. 595 (1979)
- Mills v. Baldwin, 362 So. 2d 2 (Fla. 1979)
- Mills v. Baldwin, 377 So. 2d 971 (Fla. 1979)
- Townsend v. Teagle, 467 So. 2d 772 (Fla. 1st DCA 1985)
- Bethel AME Church of Newberry, Florida v. Domingo, 654 So. 2d 233 (Fla. 1st DCA 1995)
- St. John's Presbytery v. Central Presbyterian Church of St. Petersburg, 102 So. 2d 714 (Fla. 1958)
- Full Gospel Temple of Tallahassee v. Redd, 82 So. 2d 589 (Fla. 1955)
- Malicki v. Doe, 814 So. 2d 347 (Fla. 2002)
- Malichi v. Archdiocese of Miami, 945 So. 2d 526 (Fla. 1st DCA 2006)
- Flynn v. Estevez, 221 So. 3d 1241 (Fla. 1st DCA 2017)

- *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru*, 591 U.S. 732 (2020)
- *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC*, 565 U.S. 171 (2012)
- *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 U.S. 507 (2022)
- *Town of Greece, N.Y. v. Galloway*, 572 U.S. 565 (2014)
- *American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, 588 U.S. 29 (2019)
- *Erie Railroad Co. v. Tompkins*, 304 U.S. 64 (1938)
- *Bilbrey v. Myers*, 91 So. 3d 887 (Fla. 5th DCA 2012)
- *Bendross v. Readon*, 89 So. 3d 258 (Fla. 3d DCA 2012)
- *Favalora v. Sidaway*, 995 So. 2d 1133 (Fla. 4th DCA 2008)

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