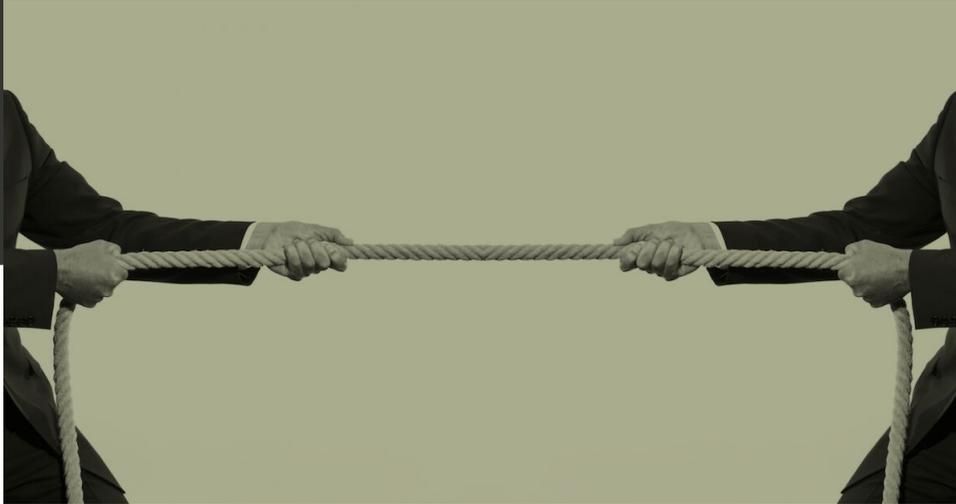


Church Feud in Bay Area Erupts

01.24.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Ask any lawyer about the types of disputes that turn ugliest fast: It's when family members turn on each other. Divorces are notorious for level of hostility; will contests are often worse. There's another example: when members of a faith family have a falling out.

Sadly, it's not unusual these days for a national church denomination to be at odds with one or more of its constituent congregations. Often, it boils down to a fight over doctrine or property – or both. That's what's happening right now in San Francisco right now where a large, flamboyant, “politically progressive” congregation known popularly in the Bay Area as “Glide,” is battling its parent organization, the United Methodist Church. The fight is over “a combination of differing belief systems and control of assets.” There is also a political aspect: “[T]he whole church is in an internal war over same-sex marriages.”

A Unique Church

The Glide Memorial United Methodist Church is not a conventional Methodist congregation. Now 89 years old, it is the largest affiliate in California, with almost 13,000 members. There are “a number of high-powered executives on its board” and it “has solid funding.”

On its website, Glide describes itself as “[a] radically inclusive, just and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization.” Its robust program of social services is a critical part of the safety net for vulnerable populations in San Francisco.

“To most San Franciscans, it's just Glide — the iconic institution at Ellis and Taylor streets in the Tenderloin that feeds the hungry, cares for the sick and hosts some of the most rollicking, joyful church services in the city.”

It didn't start out that way. In 1929, Methodist philanthropist Lizzie Glide created the Glide Foundation “for purposes of charity and worship.” She purchased a parcel of land in downtown San Francisco, and built a church there “as one of [the] primary activities of [her] vision of providing a house of

worship for all people.”

Consistent with standard practice by the United Methodist Church (UMC), the parent denomination and the local congregation executed affiliation documents that placed some of Glide’s assets in a trust for UMC.

By “1963, winds of change were blowing mightily through San Francisco. Nowhere were these forces of transformation more visible than at GLIDE Memorial United Methodist Church. That year, a young African American minister named Cecil Williams came to GLIDE to join other ministers determined to bring life back into the dying congregation.”

Over the next decade, there was swift change. “As the conservative members of the original congregation, they were replaced by San Francisco’s diverse communities of hippies, addicts, gays, the poor and the marginalized. By 1968, the energetic, jazz-filled Sunday Celebrations were packed with people of all classes, hues and lifestyles.”

“The church would never be the same again.”

In the next 50 years, GLIDE continued and expanded its important social services programs as well as its exuberant worship services.

Currently, GLIDE is the largest Methodist congregation in California, with almost 13,000 members. There are “a number of high-powered executives on its board” including, for instance, the husband of California Senator Dianne Feinstein. GLIDE “has solid funding.”

In 2000, when the charismatic preacher Cecil Williams turned 70, he was forced by the United Methodist Church to retire. But he never really left, continuing to preach and be the public face of GLIDE.

Rift with Parent Church

For decades, the relationship between GLIDE and the United Methodist Church has been “amicable.” That relationship started to fray with the installation of a new, highly traditionalist, bishop, Minerva Carcano, in 2016. She doesn’t hide her disdain for the way that GLIDE has been run for so many decades, and tried to evict Rev. Williams from the position he had held for 55 years for “egregious disregard for church rules.”

On June 16, 2018 – a Saturday night – the chair of GLIDE’s board of trustees “received an email with startling news.” Bishop Carcano removed the church’s two associate pastors effective July 1. She has no plans “for the time being” to replace them, and GLIDE does not have permission to appoint any new pastors. The following morning, Rev. Staci Current – a deputy of the bishop – appeared on her behalf at the GLIDE Sunday service. Members of the congregation were furious.

On June 25, 2018, the leadership of GLIDE issued a statement on the organization’s website to update the status of GLIDE’s “struggling” relationship with UMC.

The GLIDE officials pull no punches: “Bishop Carcano, ... has an agenda. She wants GLIDE’s church to conform to her personal idea of Methodism and Christianity. She has stated publicly and privately that her mission is to create more ‘Disciples of Christ.’ She disapproves of our church’s openness to people from all backgrounds and religions....”

They conclude that they intend to continue as they always have: “GLIDE is San Francisco. Of this fact, we are extremely proud.” They intend to continue “dialogue with the UMC” but the “terms of [any] ongoing relationship depend on the UMC returning to the attitude of tolerance that we’ve

enjoyed since Rev. Cecil Williams arrived in 1963, when he flung open the doors to all people of the Tenderloin...”

At that time, the GLIDE directors took steps to amend all organizational documents to remove connections with the UMC, including elimination of the board position previously held by the UMC bishop.

The Bishop has made vague allegations about the lack of financial transparency and GLIDE’s refusal to “formally share its financials” with UMC; however, the Bishop has been on the board since 2016 and had access to all financial information and documents. GLIDE officials view these allegations as a side issue, noting that they’re “not hiding anything” and “GLIDE’s financial management is very strong.”

Nature of Dispute

The issue “may be political; the whole church is in an internal way over same-sex marriages” and GLIDE’s pastor has been performing them for decades. There’s “also the matter of money”; the terms of the founding documents may enable UMC to “make a claim on ...valuable real estate near downtown San Francisco as well as millions of dollars raised by the congregation.” According to a land-use attorney who represents GLIDE: “The denomination says, ‘If you want to leave, you can walk out the door, but everything you own, everything your members donated, everything their parents donated, is mine now.’”

Conclusion

While it’s unclear how this rift will play out, there is precedent involving another UMC congregation in Fresno. The local church initially was ordered to give up its property in 2002 after it broke with the national denomination on the issue of same-sex marriage. But, by order of a higher court, the land and building were awarded back to the local Fresno church.

– Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director