

# The ‘crazy FOIA lady’ used state law to dislodge public records — and improve emergency response times and finances in her town

*Laura Mollo of Richlands, in Tazewell County, was met with a campaign of harassment and intimidation after she spent more than \$5,000 to file hundreds of Virginia Freedom of Information Act requests. On Thursday, she will receive a state open government award for her efforts.*

by **Susan Cameron**

**Cardinal News**

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Laura Mollo has come to be known as that “crazy FOIA lady,” and she admits she’s earned the nickname.

Over the last three years, the Richlands native has filed “hundreds and hundreds” of Virginia Freedom of Information Act requests and has spent about \$5,000 of her own money to pay for them.

Mollo, 39, isn’t a journalist working on a big story or a public official doing her job. She is a stay-at-home mom whose days had been happily filled with homeschooling her two children.

On Thursday, she will be honored with an award by the Virginia Coalition for Open Government.

It all started in 2020, when she discovered that residents of her small Tazewell County town, population around 5,200, couldn't call 911 like all other county residents when they had an emergency. If they did, they were put on hold while the calls were transferred to the Richlands Police Department, which handled the town's emergency calls.

It made no sense to her. She thought it must be a mistake.

So Mollo took her concerns to the Richlands Town Council, fully expecting its members to thank her for the information and immediately take steps to change over to the county 911 system.

Instead, she was dismissed by town officials, who waved away her concerns and told her they liked things the way they'd always been.

Many would have given up at that point, which is exactly what was expected.

But Mollo is stubborn, determined and persistent.

She began to arm herself with facts and information — financial records, budget numbers, response times for emergency calls, call logs and audio recordings, all obtained through the Virginia Freedom of Information Act.

She'd never filed a FOIA request before, so she reached out to Megan Rhyne, executive director of VCOG, for guidance and found help and an ally.

Her FOIA requests were often “resisted or only turned over grudgingly. She was disparaged and intimidated,” Rhyne said.

Many times, Mollo felt she was overcharged as a means of discouragement.

Eventually, her requests netted a lot of information, including a number of emergency calls with lengthy response times. One in particular stayed with her. It was a call from a woman whose husband had fallen while cutting and burning brush on their property.

“This lady was begging for help,” Mollo said. “And she couldn’t get anyone dispatched. She was told she’d have to wait. She called 911 back and the dispatcher with 911 was like, ‘Ma’am, I’m sorry. ... They won’t let us dispatch this.’ And 25 minutes go by.”

The dispatcher at the county 911 center called back later to see if help had arrived only to be told that the man had died while waiting and they were pulling his body out, she said.

“They didn’t get to him in time. ... And you’ll never know. You know, he might have made it. But I listened to so many calls like that where 20 to 30 minutes go by and nothing. Nobody has been dispatched. And I thought, This is just not right. We are literally talking life and death here,” Mollo said.

She contacted Tazewell County Sheriff Brian Hieatt, who oversees the 911 system. He welcomed her questions and gave her a tour of the dispatch center, which has been operating for 25 years.

It has 22 dispatchers and all receive emergency medical dispatch training. What that means, according to the sheriff, is that if a child is choking or a person is having a heart attack, one dispatcher pages the appropriate agency to respond while the other gives the caller instructions on how to help the patient.

Meanwhile, a Richlands resident who called 911 would be put on hold and the call transferred to the town police department, which caused delays and required the person to share the information several times, Hieatt said. He added that police department employees didn't have the same level of training or technology offered by the dispatch center, which deals with about 30 fire, rescue and police agencies.

The sheriff added that he'd tried several times over the years to get Richlands officials to make the switch to the county 911 system, but his pleas were rejected.

Mollo continued to ask questions and was often told it was none of her business. And the more information she acquired, the more questions she had about other town operations and budget matters.

"As so often happens with 'accidental activists' like Mollo, once she pulled on that one thread, many other threads opened up and she began to see patterns and practices that she believed were draining the town's resources," Rhyne said.

For example, why hadn't the town used any of the money that had come from the Virginia Department of Transportation for paving? The town had received nearly \$1 million from VDOT each year, and about \$250,000 of it was supposed to be spent on paving and sidewalk projects.

She also wanted to know why electric rates were so high for the town, which is one of 12 in the state to have its own electrical grid — which means it controls its own rates.

What followed was a campaign of public harassment and humiliation. Once Mollo found her mailbox filled with cow manure. On another occasion, she reached for the mail and instead found cooked spaghetti, which she believes was meant to be an insult to her husband's Italian roots.

She was the butt of jokes on social media, her photo was taken and posted online, she was accused of parking in a handicapped space when she didn't and was called a troublemaker. Many times, she and her family would go out to eat or shop in another town rather than face harassment in her hometown.

She was followed in her car, verbally harassed, and once even pulled over by police.

She was investigated by a special prosecutor after town officials accused her of perjury when she sought an order of protection against a town contractor who she said had verbally harassed her at her home over a FOIA request. She said the town claimed the visit never happened, but she had video proving it did.

Nothing came of the investigation. The special prosecutor, Russell County Commonwealth's Attorney Zack Stoots, said in a letter to the judge who appointed him: "In my opinion, based on the current evidence as has been provided to the Special Agent and myself, it would not be possible to proceed with a criminal prosecution at this time."

Mollo, who keeps good records, persevered. She admits that at times, particularly in the early days, she didn't always handle criticism in the best way, but she learned not to take things personally and to remain calm and knowledgeable.

Slowly, over time, she began to gain supporters, and attendance at the town council meetings grew. And then, one by one, town council members began to resign so that only one of the original members remains. The body has six members plus the mayor.

When the time came for the council to appoint new members to serve out the time remaining for those who resigned, many residents called for Mollo to be named. At first, the council resisted, but it finally gave in last July and she became a council member. In November, she ran for election to the seat and won a four-year term. She was one of three candidates seeking three seats and came in second with 763 votes, or 27% of the ballots cast.

Since then, she's been busy working with other council members, who she said have been supportive, to make some changes.

Last October, all emergency calls in Richlands had been switched over to the county's 911 system.

It turns out that about \$100,000 in overtime per year was being paid for a member of the town's police department to answer emergency calls, according to Mollo. The move to the county system cost the town nothing.

The police chief resigned in August, claiming he was forced out. A new chief, Ron Holt, was hired, and there was a "mass exodus" of nine

police officers, Mollo said. One of the first things the new chief did was to increase pay for officers, using the money that was no longer going to pay overtime to those answering the emergency calls. Starting pay is now \$40,000, which helped with hiring new officers, Mollo said. The goal is to have a total of 17 officers.

The police department is also now working to gain state accreditation for the first time.

In January, the town manager was relieved of his duties, and that job has not yet been filled.

Meanwhile, Richlands is currently operating in the red, and the plan is to address that for now by using about \$1 million in money the town received through the American Rescue Plan Act, the federal stimulus bill to aid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

About \$1.5 million in ARPA funds will be used to either pay VDOT back for the money that wasn't spent on paving or to do the paving, which is what Mollo expects to happen.

Town officials are also working with the Army Corps of Engineers to finally do something about the flooding that regularly paralyzes the town when there's heavy rain.

Mollo also requested that the town go through a forensic audit because of questions about the VDOT money and because "there are other unexplained instances in the budget" and "miscellaneous spending that can't be accounted for," she said. It is being conducted by a firm in Northern Virginia and is expected to take a year, she said.

Town leaders have also lowered the personal property tax rate and taken steps to help those struggling with the high electric rates.

One program Mollo has not been able to get approved is Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which would mail free books to children in Richlands. At the time, she said, she was told books are obsolete and not needed in Richlands. But she plans to continue pushing for the program.

Although she never imagined serving on the town council, or holding any political office, she's enjoying the role. Currently, she is improving her skills and training through the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership at the University of Virginia's Political Leaders Program, which is for state residents already engaged in the political, civic, business, nonprofit or governing life of their locality.

The training, which involves one weekend per month at locations across the state, runs through December.

On Thursday, Mollo and her husband, Rocky — whom she credits with supporting her throughout the last three difficult years — will be in Charlottesville to accept the 2023 Laurence E. Richardson Citizen Award for Open Government.

The award is named for one of VCOG's founding members, who was a longtime broadcaster in Charlottesville. It is given to a citizen who uses open records and open meetings laws to contribute to Virginia or to their community.

"Laura exemplifies the very best of the citizen advocate," said Rhyne. "She is smart, organized and determined. She was so steady and



steadfast that people began to trust her. She encouraged them to demand and expect answers from those in power. Never once did she seek to benefit personally. She repeatedly demonstrated how her goal was to help her town and its citizens. People like Laura are why I find VCOG's work to facilitate access to government records and meetings so rewarding. She's the real deal."

Hieatt, the sheriff, gives Mollo full credit for the town's switch to the county 911 system, saying it never would have happened without her. She deserves the award, he added.

Mollo said the award means "everything" to her.

"This was always about the citizens," she said. "It was never about me. My heart was broken that there are some people in this town who can't leave financially, who will not leave because they've been here forever. ...Those in Richlands deserve the best quality of life they can have. And the council has failed in giving it to them, so to be able to be recognized for advocating for the very people who deserve it the most — that's a big deal to me."

# Abingdon couple fuse Appalachian and Pakistani cuisines in The Pakalachian food truck

*The Pakalachian food truck features staples with quirky names like Curry Me Down South and Tikka My Senses.*

by **Susan Cameron**  
**Cardinal News**

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Ever since Mohsin and Katlin Kazmi got married in 2014, they've been busy fusing their lives, their cultures and even their cuisines.

Those culinary efforts eventually led to a business that features staples like Curry Me Down South, a hearty blend of a tomato-based chicken curry with homemade Southern mashed potatoes topped with a little cilantro chutney.

And then there's the popular dish they call Tikka My Senses. The chicken for this sandwich is marinated in a blend of more than 15 spices for two days before it's fried to a golden crisp and topped with crunchy pickles.

These creations might sound a bit exotic, but you won't find them anywhere other than the pair's colorful food truck called The

Pakalachian, which transports the tasty food to communities and events in Southwest Virginia.

He is Pakistani and grew up in New Jersey after his parents immigrated there in the 1980s. She was raised among extended family in the “heart of Appalachia” in Castlewood.

The two met while attending Virginia Tech. After they married, they took turns cooking dinner, each of them making the comfort foods they grew up with. On the third night, they ate the leftovers together, which sparked the idea for the business.

“Literally, one of the prime examples that came out of that is our main dish, Curry Me Down South. He had leftover chicken curry and I had leftover mashed potatoes. We served them together and everything sort of spiraled from that,” said Katlin.

After sharing the food with friends and family and perfecting the recipes, they opened the food truck in April 2018 to a warm welcome.

Another of the couple’s popular recipes is the Fried Green Tomater Pakoras, which combines the traditional, savory Southern dish with a common Pakistani street snack that’s like a crispy fritter.

Born and Cornbread is a collard and spinach saag served over creamy Southern-style grits with a cumin cornbread crumble.

Saag and bhindi are two of Katlin's favorite dishes that she said "warm her soul." Bhindi is fried okra with tomatoes and onions and lots of flavorful spices.

They also serve vegetarian dishes, including chili.

Recently, Mohsin said they've gotten a little more creative, such as with their version of kofta. The hearty dish has meatballs made of ground lamb or ground beef served in a rich curry sauce featuring foraged mushrooms and roasted chestnuts grown on their own trees.

The spices that the couple use frequently are garam masala, a blend of ground spices originating in India; turmeric; Pakistani chili powder; black mustard seed; clove; coriander seeds; anardana, which are dried pomegranate seeds; and cinnamon, with the combination of lime, onions, ginger and garlic.

The two countries and cultures would seem to be so different, but there are a lot of similarities, according to Katlin. She is proud to be from Southwest Virginia and said she grew up watching her parents and grandparents work hard every day, and that work ethic was passed on to her.

The same is true for her husband, she said.

"I feel like it's a very Southwest Virginia mindset to just work hard and that's all I know and I think Mohsin thinks the same way, if not more, because culturally, that's what he grew up with. So that's where I think the two cultures, seemingly opposite in a lot of ways, are more alike than you think.... What we've done is really tried to focus in on those similarities and make something that people see value in," she said.

Both are agriculture-based cultures, and Pakistani and Appalachian food share a surprising number of common ingredients, such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes and greens, all of which the Kazmis use a lot.

All the dishes are made from scratch and the ingredients are fresh, many from their own garden. The produce they don't grow themselves is sourced locally.

The truck's menu changes seasonally and from visit to visit, based on the availability of ingredients. Meals are served in environmentally friendly containers and they maintain a "no waste" mentality, composting kitchen waste and recycling empty cans and bottles.

They started with a 1996 step van and built the food truck from the ground up, rewiring it and adding in the equipment themselves. Eventually, a truck artist from Pakistan painted the distinctive and colorful design the truck features today.

The Kazmis depend a lot on their families. Katlin's grandfather, father and mother are heavily involved with the food truck. They also now have the help of Mohsin's parents, who moved to Bristol to be near their family.

For a few more weeks, the food truck will remain parked while the busy couple takes a winter break. Both Mohsin and Katlin have full-time jobs, and then some.

He is a conservation photographer and co-owner of Tamandua Expeditions, a company that promotes ecotourism and conservation in the Peruvian Amazon rain forest.

She is an educator who currently is director of the Region 7 Virtual Academy.

They also have a garden and sell plants on Etsy that they grow in a greenhouse, and they have a son, Selva, who will be 2 in March.

Both admit they have a full plate, and Katlin said it requires a lot of organization, communication, time management and the ability to function on little sleep.

“Life is too short, so we’re just trying to suck the marrow out of it,” Mohsin said.

Both describe The Pakalachian as a “labor of love.” In the summer, they try to do two events a week, and they go to two of the larger festivals, including Bristol’s Rhythm & Roots Festival.

In December, The Pakalachin was one of five winners of the SWVA Regional Bristol Casino Pitch Contest held by Virginia Community Capital. Participants submitted 3-minute pitch videos, and the winners each won \$10,000 to be used for business expenses.

Mohsin and Katlin plan to use the money to build a kitchen and open a commissary on 6 acres of land they purchased in Abingdon. The couple has had to use the kitchens of other businesses to prep and prepare their food, and they are looking forward to having their own, where they can base the food truck. They also do some catering.

They are big supporters of Southwest Virginia and plan to remain living and working here.

“I love having a business in a region that doesn’t have access to this unique food,” Mohsin said. “You know one of my favorite questions that people ask us is, ‘Why didn’t you start this business in Blacksburg or Radford or Richmond or somewhere further east where there are more people and more diversity?’ My answer and Katlin’s answer is always that the people here deserve this food. ...You can really make a community a better place and give people something to be proud of if you do it where they least expect it.”

# Southwest Virginia congregations join growing wave of disaffiliations from United Methodist Church over LGBTQ+ ministers and marriages

*This week, 264 congregations in Southwest Virginia, Northeast Tennessee and North Georgia split from the United Methodist Church over concerns about same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ ministers. Nationwide, nearly 4,000 congregations have broken with the UMC.*

by **Susan Cameron**  
**Cardinal News**

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When the Rev. Chuck Griffin is asked about the split of 264 churches in Southwest Virginia, Northeast Tennessee and North Georgia from the United Methodist Church, he often compares it to a painful divorce that's been a long time coming.

Usually, the question would come from a conservative church member who wanted to know why they had to be the ones to leave.

“I would say, ‘Imagine you’re married, and your spouse says, ‘I know we took all those vows together a few years back, but I’m not going to live by them anymore. Oh, and by the way, I’m not leaving the house



and I'm not giving you a divorce. What would you do in that situation?'

“And everybody always said, ‘Well, I’d pack my stuff and move out of the house,’ and I’d tell them, ‘That’s what we’re doing. We’re packing our stuff and moving out of the house,’” said Griffin.

He’s the pastor of Holston View Methodist Church, which has about 250 members in the Scott County town of Weber City, population around 1,500.

On April 22, Holston View was one of the churches that voted to leave the denomination during a special session of the Holston Annual Conference held in Knoxville, Tennessee. The meeting drew nearly 1,000 people.

The disaffiliations, which took effect May 29, left 578 churches in the Holston Conference. The total membership dropped from 148,580 to 117,378, representing 21% of members who departed.

The Methodist church is the second largest major Protestant denomination in the U.S., but differences — many centered around same-sex marriages and LGBTQ+ clergy members — have led nearly 4,000 churches in the U.S. to break away in recent years.

“The decision of some ‘traditionalist’ congregations to separate from the denomination was triggered by long conflict over issues around human sexuality and other matters,” states a news release issued by the Holston Conference after the vote. A church law expiring at the end of 2023 allows U.S. congregations to exit with property if they also meet other financial and procedural requirements.

Most of the churches that left were considered smaller by the Holston Conference UMC, which said that 66%, or 175, of the 264 disaffiliating congregations have fewer than 100 members. Out of 25 Holston churches with more than 1,000 members, 23 will remain United Methodist, the release states.

The number breaking from the UMC continues to grow. As of May 22, annual conferences had approved 3,838 disaffiliations, representing a loss of about 12.5% of U.S. congregations since the church law took effect in 2019, according to a May 22 UM News story on the UMC website.

And on May 27, another 249 congregations in North Carolina voted to disaffiliate, and more are expected to do the same as congregations try to get out before the Dec. 31 deadline.

Disaffiliation takes about six months to complete, according to the UMC website.

## **A ‘scripturally based disagreement’**

The congregation at Holston View is traditional and conservative, according to Griffin, who became pastor there in July 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. There was already talk of disaffiliating when he arrived.

He said the differences that led to the disaffiliation boil down to “a scripturally based disagreement related to homosexuality, specifically whether to ordain homosexuals as ministers, practicing homosexuals as ministers, and whether to allow homosexual marriages to be performed by clergy and happen in our sanctuaries.”

And although there has been more talk about those differences in the last few years, the basic issues can be traced back about 30 years, he said.

But the conflicts came to a head in 2019, when the UMC held a special General Conference, where the business of the church is conducted, to settle the issue, according to Griffin.

The United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline, described as the "fundamental book outlining the law, doctrine, administration, organizational work and procedures" of the church on its website, clearly states that same-sex marriages cannot be performed, and ordinations of practicing gays and lesbians are not allowed, he said.

During the conference, the majority, though not an overwhelming majority, voted to keep the Book of Discipline as it is, Griffin added.

"But even though the conservative side prevailed at General Conference, we had a huge part of the church that just began ignoring the discipline, saying we're going to do it anyway. So, as far as we were concerned, any real bond that we had was broken at that point," setting the disaffiliations in motion, he said.

The Rev. Tim Jones, who is communications director for the Holston Conference of the UMC, said in response: "There are people in other conferences that have gone against the Book of Discipline. However, Bishop [Debra] Wallace-Padgett has made it clear that we, Holston Conference, will continue to follow The United Methodist Book of Discipline."

Scott Burke has been a member of Holston View for more than 30 years. He grew up in an “old country evangelical Methodist church” where the worship service involved “scary, loud yelling and screaming.” He found the UMC because his wife’s father was a minister with the United Methodist Church.

He grew to love the calming, orderly nature of the church and the uniformity he found when visiting other Methodist churches while on vacation.

But in recent years he’s grown disillusioned over what he feels is a flouting of rules and regulations and the Book of Discipline, particularly when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues.

“It just seems like people were doing what they wanted to do anyway,” he said.

He doesn’t think the leader of the church should be gay and he doesn’t want same-sex marriages to be performed in the church.

But he added that as a Christian he loves all people and those who are LGBTQ+ are welcome to worship at the church.

## **A move away from bureaucracy**

About half of the Holston churches that disaffiliated, including Holston View, have chosen to become part of the new Global Methodist Church, or GMC, which launched May 1, 2022. Others are choosing to be independent.

Griffin, of Jonesborough, Tennessee, has taken a leadership role throughout the process, serving for about five years as president of the Holston chapter of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, the theologically conservative advocacy group involved in setting up the new denomination. The chapter will close at the end of May.

Currently, he is a member of a short-term committee called the Transitional Conference Advisory Team, which is setting up a GMC conference that will cover Southwest Virginia, parts of West Virginia, Kentucky and middle and east Tennessee. Griffin, who is an ordained elder with the GMC, said they hope to have a convening conference by this fall.

Another Southwest Virginia church that has decided to join the Global church is the small congregation of about 30 at Forest Church of Ivanhoe, in Carroll County.

Pastor Sandy Whittaker, who joined the GMC before her church disaffiliated from the UMC, said the issues surrounding same-sex marriages and LGBTQ+ pastors were factors for her parishioners, but they saw that as a “presenting symptom of a larger issue.”

The larger issue involved the huge church bureaucracy and a lack of accountability for the bishops who govern the church, said Whittaker, who is a student at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky.

“How do you keep supporting a system that’s breaking its own rules and bylaws and doctrine and discipline?” Whittaker asked. “That’s kind of how they felt. So, they started to feel powerless. I think that’s the best way I can explain how the people at my church feel. Betrayed was another feeling that they expressed to me.”

Matthew Gabriel, a professor and chair of the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech, said there is a tendency among American congregations these days to want to move away from larger, bureaucratic church organizations.

“I think what’s generally happening is religion is becoming increasingly localized, tied very specifically to individual parishes rather than larger communities,” he said. “So, rather than people calling themselves, for example, Methodists, they’re saying that they belong to this church on this street with this pastor. They’re breaking apart and reforming in different affiliations, and you’re seeing this across the mainline Protestant tradition — Methodists, Episcopalians, Anglicans, Baptists. So, this is part of a larger trend in which political and cultural affiliations are becoming much more important than any sort of adherence to a larger bureaucratic religious community.”

For more than 40 years, Tim Brown has been a member of the small congregation at Eatons Chapel in Staffordsville, in Giles County. His church, which has about 40 members, also disaffiliated and is going with the Wesleyan Church, a Methodist denomination founded in 1843.

Brown said his church decided to go with the Wesleyan Church because “they gave us a different offer, so to speak, than Global. You actually get 10 years of a kind of feeling-out period and you’re under their umbrella, but not fully. So, you’re more independent. It gives the congregation flexibility to see if the Wesleyans are a good fit,” he said.

The church believes that sexual relationships between people of the same sex are immoral and sinful, according to a position paper on its website.

He added that there wasn't one issue that led the church to leave the UMC, but he said there is a history of the church not following the Book of Discipline and a lack of accountability.

“There's a quote from Ronald Reagan, who said he didn't leave the Democratic Party, they left him. We feel the same way about the United Methodist Church,” he said.

### **‘Be UMC Yesterday Today & Tomorrow’**

One Southwest Virginia church that has chosen to remain with the UMC is Chilhowie United Methodist Church, whose pastor, Jacob Countiss, has prominently displayed that loyalty on the church sign, which still reads: “Be UMC Yesterday Today & Tomorrow.”

Countiss shared a photo of the sign with those at the Holston Conference of the UMC, who used it to illustrate a news release about finding new places for displaced church members.

The pastor said he came up with the idea for the sign because he was looking for a simple but meaningful way to describe his feelings.

“Most of us who are remaining United Methodist have a very deep connection with our denomination and a very deep love for our denomination,” he said. “And while there may be things we disagree about, things that we don't see eye to eye on, we've in the past had great pride in being able to remain connected and have a healthy discussion about the things we might disagree about.

“I’m still committed to having those discussions, those healthy disagreements, since this is the way we can grow together to be a more complete and more perfect people.”

The UMC has always been a big influence in Southwest Virginia, according to Countiss, who said he feels strongly about the work done through the church with Project Crossroads, which is based in Marion and helps low-income families maintain and repair their houses, and the Mel Leaman Free Clinic, also in Marion, which provides health care to the underserved.

“We really enjoy those ministries that are part of the United Methodist Church, especially since it helps us on our mission to take care of our neighbors of all races and all situations,” Countiss said.

Asked whether he or his church members are concerned about the issues of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ clergy, Countiss said, “We don’t feel that it is helpful for our mission at large to create even further distinction than are already present among us. The goal is for us to serve our neighbors and to help each other out. Creating more division, creating more categories to fit people into or corner them is not helpful toward that mission and, in fact, I feel that it detracts from it.”

### **‘This is the path we need to be on’**

Both Griffin and Whittaker say they and their parishioners are happy that the disaffiliation vote has come and gone, and their churches are looking forward to being part of the Global Methodist Church.



Griffin said he expects the transition to be smooth for those who work for the churches because the GMC has a pension plan managed by the same company that handles the UMC's plan and there's a health plan in place, so it's just a matter of getting them moved over.

For the congregation, Griffin expects there to be more of a focus on local churches.

"I think we're going to see a renewal of the traditions and Methodism that made Methodism so successful. We're going to see a focus on scripture. We're going to see a focus on discipleship and we're going to see those things happening in ways that Methodists did so well since the 18th century; there's a determination that we want to recover a lot of that," he said.

He added that the UMC has gotten "top heavy" with agencies and boards, conferences with headquarters and highly paid bishops and district superintendents and "buildings full of staff."

That will not be the case with Global, he said, although there will be bishops and people who may be called district superintendents.

"But the focus will very much be on the ground level, reaching into our communities and trying to spread the word of Jesus Christ to those who need to hear about Jesus Christ," he said.

Burke said he believes that although Global is just a year old, it will be more like the Methodist Church he joined 30 years ago.

As for the UMC's future, Jones, communications director for the Holston Conference, said, "Separating from friends and loved ones is

never easy, but the silver lining is even though there have been disagreements surrounding human sexuality and biblical interpretations, we are all still working to build God's kingdom. Our call now is to return our focus to the ministries God has given us as we seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Whittaker's church is planning a "moving forward celebration" — a massive revival on the river with three days and nights of preaching, prayer, music and food. No date has been set, but it will be held in late July.

Griffin said he and his congregation are excited about the future.

"We see a lot of hope and a strong future ahead of us," he said. "We want to bless the ones we're leaving behind and pray they do well, too. But we believe this is the path we need to be on."