

Testimony to the Maryland House of Delegates Economic Matters Committee

HB 1382

March 5, 2024, 1:00pm

Rev. Matthew S. Sichel

I am the Rev. Matthew Sichel, and I live in Manchester, Maryland. I am now clergy in the *Global* Methodist Church. However, up until July 1 of last year, I was clergy in the *United* Methodist Church, in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, serving in Hampstead, Maryland. Today, I represent the Baltimore-Washington Chapter of Wesleyan Covenant Association, a caucus group within the United Methodist Church (UMC) that advocates for traditional Christian belief. It is well known that the UMC is going through a schism over theology, especially as it relates to teachings on human sexuality, and I have recently left the UMC as a result.

Some have noted that this is the largest church schism in America since the Civil War, and that is true. 25% of the churches in the United States have already left the denomination, in what has become a costly method called disaffiliation. The denomination had tried to move toward an organized way of handling the division, but between the COVID pandemic forcing the postponement of our General Conference, and the realization that a significant number of churches wanted to leave the denomination, that organized vision has died. It died because those in leadership feared the prospects of denominational survival with such a large amount of churches leaving.

The process for disaffiliation is costly and cumbersome because the denomination owns all local church property. Other Conferences were very gracious in their terms for churches to depart. Not so in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. To leave, the Conference demanded churches pay 50% of their local church's assessed property value. For many congregations, this was impossible, as these properties can be valued at millions of dollars. Note, that though the denomination claims ownership of these properties, it is the *local church* which purchased, improved, and maintained them for decades. The Conference has been reticent and obstinate to any negotiation lowering this cost, and one of the things they consistently point to is this text in the Corporations and Associations Regulations in Maryland's Code, which I believe is an illegal intrusion of government into the life of a church. In the United States, religious organizations are promised freedom from government intervention into their ability to order their religious life. We understand this to be Jefferson's "wall of separation between church and state," to which he referred in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. Yet, here in this law, Maryland has deemed it the *government's business* to regulate the relationship between a local congregation and the denominational leadership. This should not be.

You may be aware that there is litigation pending in Anne Arundel County Circuit Court whereby 37 local churches are suing the Baltimore-Washington Conference over their onerous and spiteful property payment requirements. This should be a disagreement between the local congregations and the denomination in which the State has little to say, other than what is fair and just. The Conference should not be able to point to some item in the Maryland Code which, on its face, looks like an "establishment of religion." For this reason, I urge you all to vote in favor to repeal these items from the Maryland Code.

Thank you, and God bless you.