

Testimony to the Maryland House of Delegates Economic Matters Committee

SB0586

Corporations and Associations - Methodist Church Trust Requirement Repeal and Disaffiliation Requirements

Hearing: March 25, 2025, 1:00pm

Rev. Matthew S. Sichel

I am the Rev. Matthew Sichel, and I live in Manchester, Maryland in Carroll County. I am now clergy in the *Global* Methodist Church. However, up until July 1 of 2023, I was clergy in the *United* Methodist Church, in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, serving in Hampstead, Maryland. 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 30,000 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 (worldwide governing assembly), 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 number of churches leaving.

The United Methodist Church's General Conference did eventually create a process for single congregational disaffiliation from the denomination, to leave with their property. That process was detailed in ¶2553 of the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, which is church law. That process involved churches voting to leave and then paying a sum of money to the local Annual Conference to cover clergy pension liabilities and 2 years of annual denominational support funds. That was all that was required by the paragraph, but it did leave room for Conferences to add other payments that they felt would be necessary to appropriately complete the process.

Most Conferences in the United States adhered closely to that paragraph with little additional payment. Just to our north, the Susquehanna Conference only required additional payments of 1% of the assessed church property value. Even more, in Texas, the Annual Conference waived *all* payments and used reserves to cover pension liability for the churches that left.

That is not how this went in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. To leave, the Conference demanded churches pay 50% of their local church's assessed property value in addition to pension liability and 2 years of denominational support funds. 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 via a Trust Clause in their deeds, it is the *local church* which purchased, improved, and maintained them for decades. In very few cases, local United Methodist congregations are responsible for all property construction, maintenance, and sustenance for their churches. The Baltimore-Washington Conference provides little in the way of monetary support for the construction, maintenance, or operation of churches.

Many of these congregations have existed for 150 or so years, and they have dutifully maintained their buildings and built thriving local ministries through their own contributions. These congregations have also, year after year, paid their required annual denominational support, which amounts to about 17% of their annual budget. They provide funds for the support of the Baltimore-Washington Conference operations and the worldwide denomination, but the denomination provides only scant funds to few congregations in return.

The Baltimore-Washington Conference would have you believe that they provide much in non-monetary benefit, but this is truly not the case. In fact, their governance of local churches has become onerous as the theological differences between local United Methodists and denominational leadership have grown. This is why there is now a split happening in the church, and the denominational leadership has used this as an opportunity to extract all money that it can from congregations with whom it has fundamental disagreements.

The Baltimore-Washington 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 indirectly regulate the relationship between a local congregation and the denominational leadership. This should not be.

The Baltimore-Washington Conference would have you believe that this is a perfectly legal method for the state to regulate church governance, as it is "neutral," and yet, their justification for this method of church governance is a *theological one*. The Conference Chancellor, Thomas Starnes, admits that the Trust Clause in United Methodist deeds serves a specific theological purpose: to ensure that United Methodist doctrine and teaching is happening in local churches. It exists so that if a church begins teaching things contrary to the United Methodist Church, that the Baltimore-Washington Conference can take ownership of the property to restore proper teaching. The State of Maryland codifying this in the Maryland State Code is the government regulating church theological governance by establishing it.

You may be aware that there is litigation pending in the Maryland Court of Appeals 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, and the Baltimore-Washington Conference is neither fair nor just in their greedy extortion of money for property they *never* paid for and *never* maintained. 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 of repealing these items from the Maryland Code. I ask for a Favorable Report for SB0586.