

Witness Testimony

Before The House Economic Matters Committee

February 25, 2025

Good afternoon. I am Philip Sewell, lay leader of the Bethesda United Methodist Church near Damascus, Maryland.

Our church supports enactment of House Bill 1182.

The basis for our support of this bill is because the Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church is using the Trust Clause language that is being proposed for repeal to hold our church hostage, despite our desire to disaffiliate, or separate, from the Conference and to be free to worship in a manner consistent with Biblical Scripture. This hostage situation is caused by the application of the Trust Clause language to justify the position that all of our assets, including the church property, buildings and monies belong to the Conference and not our church. Their position is that we either have to remain in the Conference against our will or separate by abandoning the church property and forfeiting all of our assets to the Conference.

This is an untenable position for a country church near Damascus, Maryland that was founded in 1808, incorporated in 1857 and maintained to this day by community Christians and not the conference.

When our beliefs and freedom to worship consistent with scriptural teachings were compromised by positions taken by the United Methodist Church, we intended to separate from the Conference. Their reaction to our church, and other churches who shared our posture,

was to establish onerous conditions in order to separate. The worse was a requirement to pay 50% of our church's assessed property value, or nearly \$2 million. When asked if they would reduce that penalty to a more reasonable amount, their response was that they were being gracious because the Trust Clause gave them the right to access 100% of a local church's assets. To make matters worse the time period the Conference allowed churches to meet their onerous separation conditions was closed after December 2023. Subsequently, no separation path is available and our church is trapped as an unwilling member of the Conference.

Therefore, our church, along with more than 30 others, was forced to seek legal recourse to separate and try to protect our property rights. The protection of individual property rights is a fundamental tenet in the United States Constitution, along with the avoidance of governmental interference in religious matters, as stated in the First Amendment.

Exodus 9 :1 seems appropriate to our situation, where God says to Moses; "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, let my people go, so that they can worship me".

Enacting House Bill 1182 will help us to work in a gracious and loving manner with the Conference in letting God's people go, so that we can continue to worship him in a manner consistent with His word.

Thank you for your time and may God bless you today and always!