

Witness Testimony  
Before  
The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee  
February 13, 2025

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

Our church supports enactment of Senate Bill 586.

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 Baltimore Washington Conference and to be free to worship in a manner consistent with Biblical Scripture. This hostage situation is caused by the application of that Trust Clause language to justify the position that all of our assets, including the church property, buildings and monies belong to the Baltimore Washington 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, the charitable ceding of property by many local people and the individual and collective

contributions in terms of monies and sweat capital to make a thriving church for Christ.

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 Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church. The reaction by the Baltimore Washington Conference in June of 2021 to our church, and other churches who shared our posture, was to establish onerous conditions in order to separate.

The most egregious condition was a requirement to pay the Baltimore Washington Conference 50% of our church's assessed property value, or about \$1.7 million. When the Baltimore Washington Conference leaders were 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. Our church could not make the 50% ransom payment and the time period the Baltimore Washington Conference allowed churches to meet their onerous separation conditions was closed after December 2023. Subsequently, the Baltimore Washington Conference stated that no other separation path was available and our church was 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. In the meantime, the Baltimore Washington Conference has maintained that the Trust Clause language in the Maryland Code helps support their right to all of our assets and their ability to retain the church no matter what we do.

The protection of individual property rights was a fundamental tenet in the United States Constitution, along with the avoidance of governmental interference in religious matters, as stated in the Free Exercise Clause in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

I would like to offer that the removal of the Trust Clause text in Senate Bill 586 supports the avoidance of governmental interference in relation to our current interaction with the Baltimore Washington Conference.

Since we are currently being held hostage by the Baltimore Washington Conference, the biblical passage in 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 Senate Bill 586 will certainly help us to work in a gracious and loving manner with the Baltimore Washington 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!