

Witness Testimony

Before

The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

February 13, 2025

Good afternoon. I am Kevin Beall, a former pastor at Bethesda United Methodist Church in Damascus, Maryland. I grew up in a farming family in that area, and I enjoyed the farming life until I chose to serve the Lord full-time as a pastor. I pastored at Bethesda United Methodist Church until June 30, 2023, when the Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church no longer recognized me as such in the Conference when I acknowledged that I supported disaffiliation from the Conference.

The Baltimore-Washington Conference has used, in part, the Trust Clause text in the Maryland Code that Senate Bill 586 proposes repealing to thwart efforts to disaffiliate or separate from them. Therefore, I fully support Senate Bill 586, as do all Bethesda United Methodist Church members. My support is based on both religious and secular principles.

My religious perspective involves the United Methodist Church and the Baltimore-Washington Conference's acceptance of LGBTQ practices as part of their functional operations, including leadership roles and ceremonies, which defied the Book of Discipline requirements at that time. I respectfully disagree with that position based on my understanding of scripture in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 where Paul describes immoral human behavior that God rejects, and in Matthew 19:4-6 where Jesus defines marriage. I do, however, fully adhere to what Jesus taught, which was one of the two most important laws: that we need to love one another, which I seek to apply in all circumstances. This difference with the Baltimore-Washington Conference helped form my view that separation was warranted in order for us to have the inalienable religious freedom involving our beliefs and practices.

My secular perspective involves the actions used by the Baltimore-Washington Conference to impose an unreasonable payment as a condition to separate of 50% of a church's taxable property value, or about \$1.7 million in our case. Then, when we could not pay that ransom, the Baltimore-Washington Conference closed the period allowed to separate. This meant that we had to either stay in the Conference against our will or

abandon our property without any assets since The Conference alleges that the Trust Clause grants their possession of all local church's assets. These actions by the Conference run counter to my sense of fairness and equity since local, rural Christians in the Damascus community have built and maintained our church since 1808 until today, and the Baltimore-Washington Conference has not. Again, the Baltimore-Washington Conference has referred to the text in the Maryland Code that Senate Bill 586 proposes to repeal as a basis to support their ownership of local church assets.

Though I am not a constitutional scholar, this text seems unconstitutional to this country pastor. For example, the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibit governmental interference in religious beliefs and practices. A common-sense reading of these Clauses supports what is being proposed in Senate Bill 586.

Another essential principle is the need to help our fellow citizens, especially our youth, live moral, ethical lives for the betterment of our country. Bethesda United Methodist Church and its members host and participate in homeschooling, scouting, sports, and 4-H activities that teach character, integrity, and wholesome behavior to more than 500 young boys and girls. Leaders in these organizations have indicated they would no longer remain a part of Bethesda United Methodist Church if we stayed in the Baltimore-Washington Conference because of its LGBTQ posture. As a result, this wonderful outreach effort in our community and state would be jeopardized if we were not separated from the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

For the reasons I have outlined, I fully support the passage of Senate Bill 586. I am reminded of the 7th verse in 2 Chronicles 15, which says, "But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded". I pray that this will apply to your work on Senate Bill 586.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with this Committee. God bless!