

Witness Testimony

Before The House Government, Labor and Elections Committee

March 31, 2026

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

Our church supports enactment of Senate Bill 0172.

This position is based on the fact that 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 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 situation for a country church that was founded in 1808, incorporated in 1857, and maintained to this day by community Christians and not the Conference.

When our freedom to independently worship consistent with Scripture where we are today was comprised by the position taken by the Conference, we intended to separate with no animus toward

the Conference. Their reaction to our church, and other churches who shared our posture, was to establish onerous separation conditions with the worst one being the requirement to pay 50% of a local church's taxable assessed value, which in our case was nearly \$2 million. We obviously could not pay this amount, and when asked to reduce this unreasonable penalty, the Conference said they were being generous because they had the right under the Trust Clause to 100% of our assets. Then they mandated that the separation time period closed on March 31, 2023 and no other paths to separate were available. Therefore, our church was forced to consider legal recourse to protect our property rights.

The protection of property rights is a fundamental principle in the U.S. Constitution, along with the avoidance of governmental interference in religious matters 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 they can worship me".

Enacting Senate Bill 0172 will help us to work in a gracious and loving manner with the Conference in letting God's people in our church go, so we can independently worship in a manner consistent with His word.

Thank you for your time.