

LETTER OF SUPPORT
FOR
SB 172-Corporations and Associations -
Methodist Churches - Trust Requirement Repeal and Disaffiliation

Government, Labor, and Elections Committee in the House of Representatives

FORMAL WRITTEN TESTIMONY

SUPPORT – MARYLAND SB 172 (2026)

To: House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee

From: [Your Name]

Member, Asbury Broadneck United Methodist Church

Re: SUPPORT for Senate Bill 172

Date: March 28, 2026]

Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

I respectfully submit this written testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 172.

I am a member of Asbury Broadneck United Methodist Church, a 185-year-old African American congregation serving descendant communities on the Broadneck Peninsula, including Mulberry Hill, Browns Woods, Clay Hill, and Skidmore. Our church stands not only as a place of worship, but as a historic institution built and sustained through the sacrifices of generations of African American families.

I. Historical and Community Context

Asbury Broadneck was established during a time when African Americans were excluded from many institutions and relied on the church as a center of spiritual life, education, civic organizing, and mutual aid. The land, buildings, and adjoining cemetery connected to our church were acquired, developed, and maintained through local effort—often without meaningful financial contribution from denominational structures.

Our cemetery is especially significant. It contains the graves of ancestors whose lives reflect the history of this region, including individuals who lived through enslavement, segregation, and the long struggle for civil rights. These sacred grounds are not simply property—they are irreplaceable

cultural and historical assets that remain deeply tied to the identity and dignity of our community. As a result of its history, Asbury Broadneck UMC and cemetery were recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

II. Legal and Policy Rationale for SB 172

A. Restoration of Equitable Property Rights

SB 172 corrects a structural imbalance in Maryland law by repealing the automatic enforcement of the denominational trust clause. Under current practice, local church property is treated as if it is held for the benefit of the United Methodist Church, regardless of who financed or maintained the property.

This bill aligns Maryland law with the equitable principle that **ownership should reflect actual investment and stewardship**, preventing unjust enrichment. See *Restatement (Third) of Restitution and Unjust Enrichment § 1 (2011)*.

B. Consistency with “Neutral Principles of Law” Doctrine

The United States Supreme Court has held that civil courts must resolve church property disputes using neutral, secular legal principles rather than religious doctrine. See:

- *Jones v. Wolf*, 443 U.S. 595 (1979)
- *Presbyterian Church v. Hull Church*, 393 U.S. 440 (1969)

SB 172 supports this framework by providing a clear statutory rule that allows courts to evaluate property ownership based on deeds, financial contributions, and documented investments—without requiring interpretation of denominational doctrine.

C. Protection of Historically Marginalized Communities

For African American churches in descendant communities, the continued enforcement of the trust clause perpetuates a form of structural inequity. Many of these congregations built and sustained their properties during segregation, when access to capital and institutional support was severely limited. Yet, 185 years later we continue to face barriers to reclaim what is ours due to past discriminatory policies and practices.

Applying a blanket trust requirement in these circumstances effectively transfers control of locally created assets away from the very communities that established them. SB 172 advances equity by recognizing these historical realities and restoring local control.

D. Reduction of Litigation and Promotion of Public Interest

Church property disputes have led to costly and prolonged litigation across the country, placing burdens on congregations, denominations, and the judicial system.

By establishing a clear rule—allowing property retention with reimbursement for documented denominational investment—SB 172:

- Reduces legal ambiguity
- Minimizes court involvement
- Encourages fair and negotiated resolutions

This approach is consistent with Maryland’s public policy interest in promoting judicial efficiency and reducing unnecessary litigation.

E. Protection of Cemeteries and Cultural Heritage

Church-affiliated cemeteries, such as the one maintained by Asbury Broadneck, are protected not only by property law but also by Maryland’s strong public policy interest in preserving burial sites. See, e.g.:

- *Maryland Cemetery Protection Laws* (governing access and protection of burial sites)

Ensuring that these cemeteries remain under the stewardship of descendant communities helps preserve historical continuity, protects family burial rights, and honors the cultural significance of these sacred spaces.

III. Conclusion

SB 172 represents a fair, legally sound, and historically responsive policy solution. It:

- Restores equitable property rights
- Aligns with constitutional legal standards
- Advances racial and historical equity
- Protects culturally significant community assets

My grandfather, Rev. Charles Green, was one of the Methodist preachers who resisted UMC’s policy for the reasons stated above. Today, I submit this letter of support to stand in the gap for my grandfather and other communities like ours with a deep understanding that this legislation is not only about property—it is about preserving legacy, honoring our ancestors, and ensuring that future generations retain stewardship and wealth building opportunities over what was built through sacrifice and faith.