



Bishop LaTrelle Easterling

BISHOP, PENINSULA-DELAWARE CONFERENCE,
BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON CONFERENCE

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March 20, 2023 | A Message from Bishop Easterling

Dear Clergy and Laity of the Baltimore-Washington Conference:

I greet you in the precious name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. It is with sadness that The Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church informs you that the Conference has been sued by 38 churches demanding immediate separation from The United Methodist Church. We are deeply grieved by this as we seek to be a church united in love and in mission. Pursuant to our protocol, we do not comment on ongoing litigation. However, the issues raised are not novel. Here are some broad, important thoughts to keep in mind:

The BWC Trustees have created a path for those churches that wish to depart, according to the process adopted at the 2019 General Conference, which is set out in The Book of Discipline, paragraph 2553. The Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church, the denomination's highest judicial body or "court," has consistently ruled that paragraph 2553 is the only path for disaffiliation from the UMC. Despite our willingness to work with every church seeking to utilize this process, these congregations have refused to follow The Book of Discipline, choosing to file this lawsuit instead.

Since 2019, a relatively small number of churches of varying sizes and means in our Conference have followed the Discipline and used paragraph 2553 to discern disaffiliation, living into their connectional obligations. At the time of this statement, 85 churches have formally entered the disaffiliation process.

The United Methodist Church is a hierarchical and connectional denomination. As a conciliar church, our governance and obligations originate from our General, Jurisdictional, and Annual Conferences. We are also connectional. Connectionalism is one of the core theological doctrines of John Wesley that weaves the entire denomination together at every level, from the shared system for appointing bishops and clergy, to shared theology, to connected ministries, to holding property in trust, to connectional conferencing and legislative decision-making. What these churches that are suing the conference seek is vastly different from our open and transparent process, which occurs in church conferences and at our annual conference session. It is an attempt to undermine the core of the connectional commitments all churches and conferences in our denomination have to one another. And it is outside the bounds of established church law, doctrine and theology.

We ask that any groups involved in the disaffiliation process uphold the obligations and responsibilities set forth in paragraph 2553 and the BWC disaffiliation policy, which were established pursuant to the General Conference in 2019. Further, we ask that they not disparage or cause spiritual harm to other United Methodist churches, other members in their churches, other pastors, or the Conference. We remain committed to upholding the core tenants of our Book of Discipline and the rulings of our Judicial Council. To do otherwise has significant unintended consequences. For instance, an abrupt separation creates significant issues that could damage benefits and pensions for retired pastors and their spouses who devoted their lives to service. Further, the mission shares, which paragraph 2553 require, give support to our camps, as well as campus ministries, to natural disaster response projects, to food and homeless ministries, and to vital missions in our communities and abroad. Without the committed funding from the United Methodists churches in the BWC, these ministries will no longer be able to flourish.

As the servant leader of such a diverse and dynamic conference, it breaks my heart that any feel the need to withdraw from our connection. It is possible to hold differing theological beliefs and lovingly remain united as disciples of Jesus Christ. I give God thanks for the overwhelming majority of laity and clergy who remain committed to our ministry within the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Even when we find ourselves in disagreement, we are still called to conduct ourselves in ways that bring honor and glory to God. It is our prayer that this matter will be resolved quickly. As the process is being faithfully addressed, may we all be in a posture of prayer for one another and our entire conference.

Blessings and peace,

Bishop LaTrelle Easterling

Baltimore-Washington and Peninsula-Delaware Conferences
The United Methodist Church

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