



BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON CHAPTER

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March 21, 2023

To our sisters and brothers of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church:

We read with grief the statement by Bishop Easterling regarding a suit by 38 churches within the Conference. It is indeed sad that churches have been placed in this position, but it should not be surprising. The bishop herself, although she has since recanted from the agreement that she signed, proposed separation as the best means to resolve our differences. Many churches in the Baltimore-Washington Conference (BWC) still seek that reconciliation but find that our voices have not been heard. This letter, and perhaps that litigation, are additional attempts to be heard.

There has been one narrative provided by our Bishop. We provide another.

When the BWC Disaffiliation process was first presented, representatives of the WCA met with the bishop and the BWC Trustees to seek a more just process for separation that did not include onerous payments for property. Those conversations were rebuffed. Out of 54 conferences in the U.S., ours is one of only 15 that have chosen to pursue unreasonable enrichment by adding tens of millions of dollars of exit fees – fees not required by the Book of Discipline ¶2553. The bishop purports "willingness to work with every church" but the Conference she leads refuses to hear the pleas for grace from church families. In fact, she pointed out that the conference is entitled to 100% of the assessed property and is being quite generous in only demanding half the value of the buildings and property that faithful members have contributed to over centuries.

The bishop claims that "these congregations have refused to follow The Book of Discipline, choosing to file this lawsuit instead." While we do not speak for those congregations and do not comment directly on the lawsuit, we find that statement ironic coming from the bishop who affirmed in June 2022 that the actions of the **BWC** have not been in agreement with the *Discipline*. It is our estimation that most, if not all, of the churches who have sought to litigate have done so reluctantly but see no other option available if they wish to leave the UMC.

The bishop points to the BWC disaffiliation policy but conveniently leaves out that this policy was only provided in mid-2021. Until a year ago, many churches anticipated that the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation that our bishop helped negotiate would be enacted and felt ¶2553 would not even be relevant. The continued delay of General Conference has left traditionalist churches with little recourse. We see no reasonable path for passage of the Protocol (or any other reasonable separation agreement) in 2024.

Faithful churches that have paid their mission shares and put resources into maintaining church properties now find themselves trapped. Walking away from sanctuaries for which generations have sacrificed is a terrible option. Raising six/seven figure ransom demands is not an option for

most. And, for many, remaining in the UMC is not an option. We suspect that the churches in this lawsuit long to be a part of an open and transparent process as described in ¶2553. What seems “outside the bounds of established church law, doctrine and theology” is demanding millions from those who have remained faithful to the Discipline. The Judicial Council may have acknowledged that ¶2553 doesn’t prohibit BWC from adding requirements, but the Bible provides a long history of not taking financial advantage of our sisters and brothers.

The bishop asks that churches not disparage or cause spiritual harm to other UM churches, yet she continually disparages these members of her own flock. She implies departing churches will “damage benefits and pensions for retired pastors and their spouses”, yet the straight ¶2553 process includes support for our share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations, if there actually are any. She implies that mission shares fund natural disaster response projects and food and homeless ministries, yet those are not apportionment funded.

It breaks our hearts that our Trustees care so little about local missions crippled by the demands of these onerous requirements. That so few BWC churches chose to use the ¶2553 process is not a sign of conference health but rather confirmation that the additional requirements are beyond the ability of many churches to pay. In fact, the Bishop’s disaffiliation numbers seem inflated since, as far as we know, about 20 congregations will actually vote on leaving. Dozens more across the BWC expressed that they wished to go but were discouraged by the cost. Our conference’s additions to ¶2553 and the unwillingness of conference leadership to listen have left these churches with no other option but to seek litigation. Where can we turn if our leadership, who holds all the power, will not listen to our cries?

The vast majority of other Annual Conferences have offered far more gracious exits for traditional churches. We are asking our leadership to reconsider the extraordinary requirements added to ¶2553. We are seeking a return to the table. We are seeking grace. Love requires two parties, Bishop Easterling: you questioned the love of these churches who would seek to litigate but they have not seen this love reciprocated. Churches involved with the lawsuit have expressed that they came into that process with great reluctance. You and the Conference Trustees hold the power - this is a justice issue. Local churches in the BWC have little to no voice in the direction of our denomination.

We welcome an invitation back to the table. We pray every day for our bishop and our Conference, and we also look forward to a rapid and peaceful resolution in these challenging times.

Sincerely,



Greg Witte

Vice President, Wesleyan Covenant Association - Baltimore Washington Chapter