

An Open Letter to the United Methodist Church: New Town UMC, Virginia Conference

March 30, 2023

Brothers and Sisters in Christ within the United Methodist Church,

We are reaching out to tell a painful and difficult story that impacts the lives of hundreds of families. As you know, the United Methodist Church has been divided for many years. New Town UMC was planted twenty-three years ago by Pastor David Ford and from its beginning, the congregation has been unified in its Traditionalist view of the Scriptures.

Pastor Garry Livermon, an Elder in the UMC, was serving as the Pastor of New Town UMC in 2021, but health issues prevented him from continuing to serve. Greg West, an Elder in the UMC, who also served as an Evangelist in the Virginia Conference, was appointed as the part-time interim Pastor in January of 2022. We, as a congregation, looked with hope to the upcoming summer 2022 General Conference to pass the Protocol of Grace and Reconciliation through Separation. The congregation was united in the desire for an amicable separation within the UMC. This General Conference was postponed until 2024. New Town then pursued the disaffiliation process set up and offered by the Virginia Conference of the UMC, in order to separate from the UMC, per paragraph 2553 of the United Methodist Book of Discipline.

Out of courtesy and respect, the leadership of New Town UMC reached out to the family who had given the land for the church more than twenty years ago. There are three retired United Methodist Elders in this family. The land was a gift to the Virginia Conference of the UMC. There was no 'revert to donor' or 'reverter' clause or any other provision in the deed which restricted the use of the property. We wanted to communicate clearly with this family our reasons for pursuing disaffiliation, to prevent any misunderstanding. They strongly opposed the idea of New Town UMC disaffiliating, and two more meetings followed.

New Town UMC was fully prepared to participate in the October 29, 2022 Disaffiliation Conference and followed the steps outlined by the Virginia Annual Conference. Less than a week before our congregational meeting to vote on disaffiliation, the Virginia Conference required that we change the date. We were told that the reason for this change was that we did not use the statement from the Conference Attorney in our announcements. This was the first time that we had heard about this statement and requirement. We objected, but to no avail. On the new date the vote was taken and ninety-four percent of the congregation voted in favor of disaffiliation from the UMC. However, in our rushed effort to send out two required notifications of the changed date of the vote, we missed one of the deadlines by twelve hours. For this, the Conference ruled that we were not eligible to participate in the Disaffiliation Conference in October. Of course we felt wronged and objected, but we had no recourse.

So we again proceeded in good faith for the February 18, 2023 Disaffiliation Conference. Our second congregational vote was ninety-seven percent in favor of disaffiliation from the UMC. We knew that the family who had given the land to the Conference was campaigning for clergy and laity to speak and vote against us. We were told that they were sharing a letter of their talking points around the Conference. We were not able to obtain copies of the two documents until after the Disaffiliation Conference. The documents were entitled "New Town UMC Disaffiliation FAQ" and "Essential Disaffiliation Info – New Town UMC's Unique Situation Deserves Extra Attention." We believe these documents are inaccurate in their explanations of New Town UMC's status and pursuit of disaffiliation as well as of the requirements contained in paragraph 2553. There was a non-disclosure agreement in the disaffiliation agreement that the Trustees of New Town UMC signed. So we did not feel free to respond to the family's campaign against our disaffiliation with information for the delegates supporting our side of the issue.

The online Disaffiliation Conference took place on February 18, 2023 with Bishop Hupert-Johnson presiding; [See the VAUMC Youtube site: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uY3MbNKKQsk&t=13s>] There were thirty-four churches in the Virginia Conference seeking to disaffiliate from the UMC. The first

motion of the Conference was to completely stop the disaffiliation process in the Virginia Conference because of 'misinformation'. Pastor Greg West spoke against this motion, stating that the answer to misinformation was the communication of clear, concise and truthful information; and that the people of the Virginia Conference were intelligent and could sort through what is true and false. The motion to stop all church disaffiliations did not pass. The next motion was to separate New Town UMC from the other thirty-three churches that were seeking to disaffiliate. The argument was made that the land was given by a family with the idea that it would always remain in the UMC. We argued that this motion was out of order, because the Virginia Conference Attorney, Andrew White, stated clearly from the United Methodist Book of Discipline during the October 29, 2022 Disaffiliation Conference that "Paragraph 2553 does not include any inquiry into the value of the property, the source of the property- where the property came from." [See the VAUMC Vimeo site: <https://vimeo.com/764310878> - Forward to 2:42.45]

In addition, the Conference's own "Disaffiliation Report Guide" (<https://doc.vaumc.org/AC2023/Feb2023DisaffiliationReportingGuideFINAL.pdf> FAQ #14) for the February Disaffiliation Conference states that "certain property rights are outside the scope of the disaffiliation process." The guidance states that even if a family had any special claim or reverter clause on the property (they didn't), the Conference delegates were instructed to ignore them for the purposes of disaffiliation under paragraph 2553. This guidance was ignored by the Conference, even when Greg West specifically asked the Conference Attorney to clarify the issues at stake.

The Bishop dismissed our claim that the motion was out of order and allowed arguments to be made that New Town UMC was different because of the gift of the land and the intentions of that gift. The Conference vote on separating New Town UMC from the other thirty-three churches was split fifty - fifty on the screen. The Bishop reported the actual numbers to be within seven votes, allowing New Town UMC to be separated from the others. The other thirty-three churches were voted on as a group and within minutes they were all allowed to disaffiliate.

The speeches for and against New Town UMC's disaffiliation were then heard. Many of the arguments against New Town's disaffiliation were about the financial value and missional value of the land in addition to the intentions of the family that donated the land. We declared to the Conference that what was happening was unjust. Tom Hassler, the lay delegate for New Town UMC tried to speak at this time, but was not called on. Pastor Greg West made arguments against favoritism including the fact that his family had given land for a Methodist Church in the 1800s; and it would be preposterous for his family to have a say in that church's current affairs. He pleaded with the Conference not to 'scatter the sheep', again, to no avail. After a final speech by a member of the family who gave the land, and who is also a retired Elder, the discussion was closed and New Town UMC's disaffiliation was denied in the vote that followed.

We believe that the Conference did not follow its own clearly stated rules. The Bishop and the Conference Attorney allowed the Conference to believe that they can and should take into account the land, the monetary value of the land, the missional value of the land, as well as the donors of the land as they were considering their votes.

What is the recourse for New Town UMC? We have been told there is no appeal and no opportunity for another chance at a future Disaffiliation Conference, and also no apparent route to the Judicial Council to get a ruling.

On March 7, 2023, Pastor Greg West met with the Bishop at her request just sixteen days after the Disaffiliation Conference. Despite being told that this meeting was only a consultation and there was no need to bring anyone, Fred Rojek from the Leadership Board accompanied Greg West. With the Bishop were her assistant Steve Summers and the District Superintendent Charles Ledlum-Bates. The Bishop communicated that Greg West was immediately being removed as the Pastor of New Town UMC and that he had two options: 1) to leave the church building with the congregation or 2) to take another appointment with a church that is going through the disaffiliation process. The reason given for the removal was 'disloyalty to the UMC'. Greg West rejected this claim arguing that he is and has been loyal

to the UMC during his twenty-four years of service. The evidence presented of disloyalty was that Greg West stated that the process of disaffiliation for New Town UMC was unjust, thus undermining the will and the work of the Conference.

Fred Rojek and Greg West appealed to the Bishop to leave the Pastoral appointment in place until the end of June, the normal time to move Pastors. The Bishop then directed that Greg West would be allowed two weeks until removal and stated that the new Pastor had already been appointed. The process of consultation with the Staff Parish Relations Committee and Pastor that the UMC Book of Discipline requires was bypassed.

Two days after meeting with the Bishop, Greg West received an email with an attached letter from the chair of the Board of Discipleship of the Virginia Conference, with the following statement:

“After reaching out to your District Superintendent we received a response from the Cabinet notifying us that the Cabinet decided not to write an endorsement to recommend you as the Virginia Conference General Evangelist. Based on their response and our own Board’s uneasiness; we will not be recertifying you as Virginia’s Conference Evangelist.”

Once again, there was no consultation with Greg West or the Board of Life in His Name Ministries, though he had served in the Virginia Conference as an Evangelist for thirteen years.

New Town UMC has been a missional church that is passionate about making disciples of Jesus Christ in Williamsburg, VA for twenty-three years. In its short history it has witnessed one hundred and seventy-two professions of faith. It has sent out six Pastors into ministry in the Virginia Conference. Numerous missionaries and missions are supported by New Town UMC as it gives ten percent of its offerings to missions. All of these ministries have been disrupted.

The issues at hand are 1) The fairness and integrity of a process put forward by the Virginia Conference of the UMC. 2) The unfair removal of an Elder in good standing serving as both Pastor and Evangelist disregarding required procedure. The disaffiliation process was followed for forty-three churches (ten in October 2022 and thirty-three in February 2023), but disregarded for one church. The leadership and people of New Town UMC pursued disaffiliation in good faith and now are experiencing the pain and repercussions of what we believe is clearly unfair treatment. We have great concern that other congregations and Pastors seeking disaffiliation in the Virginia Conference and beyond will be treated in the same way. Will the new standard in the Virginia Conference be removal from appointments and extension ministries with no consultation? Our General Rules state: “Do no harm.” Harm has been done. We appeal to the Virginia Conference and to the UMC to correct these wrongs and prevent further harm.

The majority of the New Town congregation walked away from the UMC and the church building last Sunday. In our last act of worship in New Town UMC on March 19, 2023, we blessed the sanctuary, we blessed all who will gather in it in the future and we blessed the UMC. The United Methodist Church and the churches and Pastors that seek disaffiliation are still called to be witnesses of the grace and truth of Jesus Christ to the watching world. United Methodist Churches and Global Methodist Churches, though they have profound disagreements, will be in the same towns and cities. We all must model the reconciliation that Christ died to make possible.

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Rev. Greg West & Eric Shuey, Chair of the Leadership Board
Williamsburg, Virginia