

**Statement by Rustin Parsons,
Representative of Mt. Bethel Church in Marietta, Georgia
Regarding the Mt. Bethel Church's Initiated Process to Disaffiliate from
The United Methodist Church
April 26, 2021**

Mt. Bethel Church has served in this community for more than 175 years. We readily admit that we are not a perfect church filled with perfect people. In fact, we confess every Sunday that we are sinners in need of God's redeeming love.

But motivated by the love and grace, and the life and teachings of Jesus, we make it our daily goal to love and serve our neighbors here in Marietta, the greater Atlanta area, and around the world as Jesus would have us do.

Our denomination wisely requires each bishop to consult with churches in advance regarding pastoral changes. But Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson did not consult with us. Rather, as Dr. Jody Ray noted, she surprisingly and abruptly *just notified us* of her decision to move our senior pastor.

As many people in this community know, every weekend thousands of people attend Mt. Bethel worship services, and throughout the week they attend classes and meetings, and volunteer to serve in the numerous ministries we do throughout this community. Further, during the week hundreds of children attend Mt. Bethel Christian Academy, our K-12 school. In order for us to do our work and service at the church, the school, and the community, we have a staff of over 300 people, and thousands of volunteers who give of their time, talent, and resources so we can fulfill our mission.

So we are very dismayed that the Bishop would, without wise counsel and close collaboration, arbitrarily and abruptly notify our pastor and our lay leadership that she intends to move our senior minister. Despite our repeated requests that she reverse course she has refused to do so – or provide a reason or rationale for her capricious action.

Consequently, Mt. Bethel's 49-member administrative council has informed the Bishop we are very happy to have Dr. Ray continue to serve as a lay minister at our church, and therefore we are not in a position to receive or in need of any pastor she intends to send us. The vast majority of the Mt. Bethel congregation is completely supportive of this decision. To date, nearly 5,000 members and friends have signed a petition informing the Bishop we are pleased with Dr. Ray's service to this church and that we have no intention of receiving another pastor.

While we are saddened that Dr. Ray feels he has no choice but to surrender his credentials as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, we believe his time with Mt. Bethel is not yet finished. The church's Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) has hired Dr. Ray to be chief executive officer and lead preacher, and we look forward to his continued service to our congregation and community.

Furthermore, under a provision outlined in our denomination's governing by-laws, we have initiated the process to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church. As many people are aware, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance at most of the denomination's local United Methodist churches in the U.S. has been plummeting for years and giving to the general church has dramatically declined forcing the denomination to propose massive budget cuts. The decline in worship attendance and the lack of giving are in large part due to a long, contentious and destructive debate over theological and ethical matters. It is widely known our denomination stands on the brink of a major division.

Therefore, given the recent actions of our bishop and the direction of the United Methodist denomination, both the leadership and members of Mt. Bethel Church strongly believe it is time for us to part ways with the denomination. It is our hope that our disaffiliation will be amicable, orderly, and timely. We long to go our separate way in peace so we can give our full attention to being the church God has called us to be in this community, the greater Atlanta area, and in our missions around the world. Thank you.