

Mt. Bethel Church on Request for Disaffiliation—Please Let Us Vote

Information about Mt. Bethel and its request to disaffiliate from the UMC

Why is there confusion about Mt. Bethel and its request to disaffiliate?

- What a great question! **Here are the most common misperceptions:**
 - **Mt. Bethel is in “exigent circumstances.”** That’s news to us! We’re open for worship every Sunday and all our worthy ministries continue. Our current lay leadership has never received any complaints from the N. Ga. Conference...until we asked to vote on disaffiliation.
 - **Mt. Bethel brought this lawsuit on.** Actually, the N. Ga. Conference Trustees sued Mt. Bethel, and can withdraw their lawsuit at any time. Our Bishop can also at any time enable Mt. Bethel members to vote on disaffiliation by calling a Church Conference.
 - **Only churches in good standing are permitted to pursue disaffiliation.** This is simply not true. It’s not stated anywhere in the Book of Discipline or in ¶12553, nor has this standard been applied to other churches that have successfully left under ¶12553. In fact, such language was explicitly removed from the original legislation that eventually became ¶12553 before it was ratified by the General Conference in 2019.
 - **The WCA is orchestrating our disaffiliation to “pluck Mt. Bethel for its new denomination.”** The WCA is not a church, it is an advocacy group within the UMC just like UMC Next and Reconciling Ministries. Similarly, the WCA is planning for a post-Protocol Methodism by working to create The Global Methodist Church (GMC), which has not been officially formed. If Mt. Bethel leaves the UMC at this point, it will be independent. It would only join the Global Methodist Church when it exists, and only if our members vote to do so. According to the Global Methodist Church’s Transitional Book of Doctrine and Disciplines, there will be no trust clause on local church assets, unlike the UMC. There is simply nothing to be “plucked” by the GMC or the WCA.
 - **This is all about Jody...**The treatment of our lay leadership (SPRC) and our senior pastor as it affects Mt. Bethel’s fruitful ministry and mission, Bishop Hauptert-Johnson’s refusal to consult, and her open disdain for the Traditional Plan reduced Mt. Bethel’s confidence in her leadership to such a degree that they requested disaffiliation to enable all Mt. Bethel members to vote.
 - **Ferrell Coppedge sits on the WCA Council and that’s a conflict of interest.** Mt. Bethel’s Admin Council voted years ago to join the WCA, and even hosted several thousand members at a Global Gathering in 2018, which was widely and publicly promoted. Because of Mt. Bethel’s early role in forming the WCA, Ferrell Coppedge accepted election to the WCA Council. He is lending his time and talents to assist a worthy organization that supports theologically conservative denominations. If Mt. Bethel leaves the UMC now, it can’t “join the WCA” because it is already a member of the WCA—an advocacy group within the UMC, not a denomination.
 - **A small, rogue group of leaders are running things at Mt. Bethel.** The same Administrative Council and Church Committees that were approved in 2020 are still in place. Bishop Hauptert-Johnson orchestrated a pastoral conflict at Mt. Bethel which threatened to disrupt its fruitful ministry, so the Committee Chairs agreed to work extra time and meet more often and to report back to the Administrative Council at regular intervals. **This group of dedicated servants is the “executive committee” and their names are publicly available.** They have faithfully reported to the full Admin Council, which has made all major decisions through a vote. The committees they chair continue to function as well. Everything about the governance of Mt. Bethel is consistent with the Book of Discipline.

Why is there a group with different opinions about the situation at Mt. Bethel?

- Another great question! Mt. Bethel lay leaders and pastors understand there are different opinions about the future of the church. We want all members to get a vote. Here are a few thoughts on this important situation:
 - **Some of our members may want to remain in the United Methodist denomination.** They may be concerned that a “request to disaffiliate” is the final step. But it’s merely the beginning of a process that would enable them to vote their conscience. The Bishop is preventing that by refusing to allow a Church Conference. All we want is for the Bishop to let us vote.
 - **Some members are open to pastoral change.** That is understandable. Dr. Jody Ray has stated publicly that he serves at the pleasure of Mt. Bethel. He does not have a permanent position. Should Mt. Bethel ultimately vote to disaffiliate, it will still have annual lay leadership and a Staff-Parish Relations Committee, which can engage membership regarding pastoral change.
 - **Some members think the WCA is up to something with regard to Mt. Bethel.** This is unfounded. Mt. Bethel has been a member of [the WCA](#) for years and no members raised concerns. The WCA is not a denomination. It is an advocacy group within the UMC and Mt. Bethel is already a longstanding member. Like many others in the UMC, the WCA is working to form the Global Methodist Church in anticipation of The Protocol passing. The Global Methodist Church does not exist as a denomination today. If Mt. Bethel members voted in favor of disaffiliation, Mt. Bethel would be independent and Mt. Bethel members would have to decide whether or not to join the Global Methodist Church at a later time.
 - **Some members fear a long legal battle.** This is a heartfelt concern and one that current Mt. Bethel leadership shares. We begged for consultation initially and prayed and tried wholeheartedly to achieve a mediated solution this summer. If the Bishop would only let us proceed to a vote on disaffiliation, we would know where the church stands.
 - **Some members think Mt. Bethel is run by a handful of rich donors.** Mt. Bethel has a 50-member Administrative Council and Committees that are slated by a church nominating committee and approved each year. We also have a lay leader who works with all of these groups and our senior pastor. Together, in prayer, consultation, cooperation and fellowship, these servants guide the direction of the church.
 - **Some members are really unhappy about changes at Mt. Bethel.** Change can be very difficult, especially when it affects long-cherished traditions. From the public letters we have read, some members really miss their old service times and conventions. They may equate the Bishop’s reappointment with an opportunity to return to former ways. We don’t believe the Bishop truly cares about their concerns, but if the Bishop would allow us to vote, these members can make their voices heard. In addition, the Mt. Bethel lay leadership, Administrative Council President and Committee Chairs are available to hear any concerns.

Who is representing Mt. Bethel in the civil suit brought by the North Georgia Board of Trustees of the UMC? Who is paying the legal fees?

- Mt. Bethel’s legal team is [Moore Ingram Johnson & Steele, LLP](#), a highly regarded firm with extensive experience in civil litigation.
- Joining this stellar team pro bono is Keith Boyette, an active member of the Bar and the current President of the WCA. Prior to entering the ministry over 20 years ago, Boyette was an appellate

litigator with a prestigious Richmond, Va. law firm. He is a valuable resource regarding BoD legislation and implementation.

- Retired Judge David Darden has also joined the Mt. Bethel legal defense team on a pro bono basis. Judge Darden is a highly respected Georgia State Court judge.
- Mt. Bethel has an earmarked budget set aside for litigation.
- Several generous members have agreed to lend support to Mt. Bethel's legal fees. The most certain and effective way to manage legal costs is for Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson to allow Mt. Bethel members to vote on disaffiliation.

More on Mt. Bethel and the UMC than you ever wanted to know...

Who is Mt. Bethel Church?

- Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church has a 180-year history of Christ-centered ministry and fellowship in Marietta, Ga.
- It is known as a theologically orthodox church which holds fast to the authority of Scripture and traditional Christian beliefs.
- Mt. Bethel is the largest church in the North Georgia Conference of the UMC—it has 10,000 members, more than 300 employees, including a K-12 Christian school, a daycare and two campuses.
- Mt. Bethel's Senior Minister, Rev. Dr. Jody Ray, interprets Scripture from a historical Christian viewpoint. Under his spiritual leadership, Mt. Bethel's has attracted new members, expanded worship to a North Campus, and engaged in fruitful ministry and missions locally and globally.

What's been happening in the UMC?

- It is widely known that the United Methodist denomination is headed toward schism.
- At the 2019 General Conference in St. Louis, a majority of delegates voted to uphold "the Traditional Plan" which holds to the language of the 2016 version of the Book of Discipline (BoD). This caused great frustration and lament among centrists and progressive delegates.
- Also at 2019 General Conference, a process for disaffiliation was adopted via ¶ 2553 of the Book of Discipline, which would enable churches to disaffiliate from the UMC with their property.
- Against this backdrop, the [Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation](#) was drafted and signed at the 2019 General Conference in St. Louis. "The Protocol" was a mediated agreement for separation in the United Methodist Church.
- The Protocol is still on hold, however, and cannot be implemented until it passes a vote at the next General Conference, tentatively scheduled for August 2022.

What happened in April 2021 to cause Mt. Bethel to request disaffiliation?

- The UMC BoD and the Bishop of the North Georgia Conference [tout a consultative process](#) for reappointments that involves leadership, laity (the Staff-Parish Relations Committee) and clergy—but this process was completely disregarded.
- Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson and her staff did not engage with Mt. Bethel in the consultative process for reappointments that she [publicly professed](#) to follow and that the BoD demands.

- Bishop Hauptert-Johnson initially refused to talk to the Mt. Bethel Staff-Parish Relations Committee when they requested consultation, questioned the abrupt and unrequested reappointment and appealed her decision.
- When Bishop Hauptert-Johnson belatedly and begrudgingly agreed to speak to our SPRC Chair, she did not engage in meaningful dialog, refused to admit that she and her staff merely provided notification and ended any further discussion.
- The Mt. Bethel lay leadership felt that this mistreatment showed a disturbing disregard for the fruitful ministry and mission of Mt. Bethel.
- The Administrative Council (the church's 50-member lay leadership body) voted unanimously to request disaffiliation from the UMC, which would eventually enable every Mt. Bethel member to vote whether or not to remain in the current denomination.

What is the Bishop's side of the story?

- It's tough to say for certain as Bishop Hauptert-Johnson has changed her story multiple times:
 - At first, Bishop Hauptert-Johnson said that Dr. Ray's gifts were needed for a newly forming (non-pastoral) role on racial reconciliation within the conference.
 - Later, Bishop Hauptert-Johnson claimed there were seven complaints against Dr. Ray, although she has never shared those complaints with Mt. Bethel laity or Dr. Ray.
 - Bishop Hauptert-Johnson has since maintained that she has every right to appoint who she wants, when she wants, regardless of input from congregations.
 - Bishop Hauptert-Johnson has indicated that she cannot work with the lay leaders of Mt. Bethel because she does not recognize them, even though they were duly appointed.
 - Most recently, Bishop Hauptert-Johnson and her cabinet and Trustees have claimed that Mt. Bethel, the largest church in their jurisdiction, is in "exigent circumstances," a term long understood to describe failing churches on the brink of closure.
- Why would Bishop Hauptert-Johnson seek to create a vital role within the church for racial reconciliation with a pastor she says has seven formal complaints against him?
- How could Bishop Hauptert-Johnson forego the consultation [she publicly professes](#) should accompany all of her pastoral appointments?
- Why is Bishop Hauptert-Johnson invoking the Trust Clause, which was designed to protect the church from false doctrine, when all Mt. Bethel has requested is to begin the process of disaffiliation, which is allowed in the BoD?

Why is disaffiliation so important now? Can't Mt. Bethel wait for The Protocol?

- Mt. Bethel's lay leaders and pastoral leaders have expressed support for The Protocol since its inception in 2019. We would have waited for The Protocol to pass, but feared the non-consultative action taken against Mt. Bethel by its Bishop would potentially prevent our church from ever voting.
- Basically, Mt. Bethel's lay leadership took the steps to enable each church member to vote. Bishop Hauptert-Johnson has not allowed that process to begin.
- It is difficult to know how centrist and progressive UMC leaders, including Bishop Hauptert-Johnson, truly feel about The Protocol and traditional congregations leaving the denomination.
- We have some indication about how open and supportive of The Protocol Bishop Hauptert-Johnson is based on her actions:

- Bishop Hauptert-Johnson convened with centrist and progressive leaders and joined the Board of a group called [UMCNext](#), which vows to reject the Traditional Plan adopted at 2019 General Conference.
- Bishop Hauptert-Johnson supported the One Church Plan, which was voted down at 2019 General Conference in favor of the Traditional Plan.
- As of September 2021 in three different jurisdictions, centrist/progressive bishops have removed/reassigned theologically conservative pastors from their pulpits without consultation. Dr. Ray’s reappointment is one example.
- Dr. Steven Usry, Bishop Hauptert-Johnson’s choice to lead Mt. Bethel, has stated publicly that he cannot commit to lead Mt. Bethel to disaffiliate from the UMC at this time, and that he is not certain about doing so should The Protocol eventually pass.
- Bishop Hauptert-Johnson intends to remain in the United Methodist Church if the Protocol is approved. Most importantly, the post-Protocol United Methodist Church will immediately move to repeal the Traditional Plan and eliminate many of the doctrines that have been in the BoD since the beginning of the United Methodist Church.
- The Protocol is a mediated agreement and is conditioned on no “material amendments,” which could break the fragile coalition that is essential to pass the Protocol. Bishop Hauptert-Johnson does not support the Protocol as written and would likely want to add several significant amendments designed to defeat the fragile Protocol coalition.

What is the WCA and does it have anything to do with this?

- The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) was born out of the Confessing Movement and Good News, two theologically conservative groups of Methodist believers.
- Mt. Bethel first aligned with Maxie Dunnam and the Confessing Movement under its former pastor, Dr. Randy Mickler. Later in 2016, Mt. Bethel joined in the creation of the WCA—and Mt. Bethel’s membership in the WCA was approved unanimously by the Administrative Council.
- In 2018, Mt. Bethel hosted the global gathering of the WCA, which was publicized widely to church members and throughout the North Georgia Conference. Bishop Hauptert-Johnson and her District Superintendent were invited to attend, but they did not.
- The WCA is working with other orthodox renewal groups to launch The Global Methodist Church, which would incorporate theologically conservative denominations that vote to disaffiliate should The Protocol pass.
- The WCA supports Mt. Bethel’s ministry and mission and has openly declared that Bishop Hauptert-Johnson’s actions fall afoul of the spirit and the letter of the Book of Discipline.
- The WCA gains NO BENEFIT should Mt. Bethel be allowed to hold a church-wide vote and should that vote lead to disaffiliation any time in the near future.
- If Mt. Bethel is given the chance to vote on disaffiliation, it would need to pass by a 2/3+ majority of present and professing members and then be approved by 50%+1 of the North Georgia Conference delegates in June 2022. Then Mt. Bethel would simply be an independent church and its property would be free and clear of the Trust Clause. At that point, future church leadership would have to evaluate whether or not to join a new denomination.

What about Dr. Steven Usry, the pastor Bishop Hauptert-Johnson appointed without consultation?

- SPRC and lay leaders agreed to accept Dr. Usry at the required salary and to provide him with office space and access to the pulpit.

- We do not know exactly why Dr. Usry did not show up for work at Mt. Bethel.
- On April 20, Dr. Usry initially told Mt. Bethel SPRC that he was offered the role of senior pastor at Mt. Bethel on April 5, the same day that Dr. Ray was notified about his reappointment, and BEFORE the Mt. Bethel SPRC was informed (he has since changed his recollection of the timing).
- On April 8, when Mt. Bethel SPRC had an online meeting with the D.S. to request consultation and to appeal the decision, the D.S. told Mt. Bethel twice that no one had been offered the role.

What about the changes to the North Campus lease? Some claim this action was improper.

- Such claims are irresponsible and without merit:
 - Mt. Bethel Christian Academy, Inc. (MBCA) was formed as a separate 501c3, not-for-profit corporation, and subsequently bought the North Campus property. MBCA is not and never has been a United Methodist Church or under the authority of the UMC . As such, it is NOT under the Trust Clause.
 - Out of abundance of caution and to eliminate any specter of ambiguity, a written statement from District Superintendent Dr. Jim Lowry and the Chancellor of the North Georgia Conference was obtained stipulating that the UMC does not have a trust interest in the North Campus property.
 - A highly respected real estate attorney and longtime Mt. Bethel member closed the purchase of the property and documented the transaction, including the loan agreements on behalf of MBCA. He worked with the title company on all of the title matters resulting in a clean title policy on the property without any exceptions as it relates to the UMC Trust Clause.
- The 20-year lease executed in May, 2021 was a positive and responsible governance action, taken to strengthen the Church and MBCA, benefitting both entities.
- The only thing remaining is for District Superintendent Jessica Terrell to provide approval of the executed lease under ¶2541 of the BoD, with a church conference. But she will not do that, because Mt. Bethel could vote on disaffiliation during a called church conference.
- Here is the full report from the Chair of the Mt. Bethel Trustees Committee, and the subsequent motion, which was voted on and passed in the Administrative Council meeting on May 23, 2021:

New Lease and Shared Facilities Agreement between the church (MBUMC) and the Academy (MBCA):

- The Academy has been operating continuously as a ministry of the Church on the main campus since 2002.
- The Academy and the Church have been operating under a one-page Annual Shared Services and Utilities Cost Allocation Memorandum since November 2013.
- The Academy and the Church agreed in 2014 to more thoroughly formalize their relationship, but have not previously done so.
- The existing Agreement is due to sunset or expire after the current 2020-2021 school year.
- A new Lease and Shared Facilities agreement has been negotiated between working groups of the Academy and the Church to formalize and extend the existing business relationship to the benefit of both parties.
- On the Church side, this has been accomplished in close consultation with the Church's Finance Chair, CFO and legal counsel (Moore Ingram Johnson & Steele).
- The lease contains commercially reasonable terms, representations, provisions, and overall features including:

- a 20-year term
- appropriate termination clauses for each party
- base and additional rent components based upon a detailed cost sharing analysis performed by the Church .
- The agreement was approved at a recent meeting of the Church's trustees committee by unanimous vote.
- The agreement was also unanimously approved by the board of trustees of the Academy.
- Among other things, the new agreement benefits the Church by:
 - More clearly defining the leased premises and shared facilities utilized by the Academy on the main campus of the Church.
 - More clearly defining the responsibilities of both the Academy and Church.
 - Assigning responsibility for maintenance, repairs and non-structural capital items of the "F" building (Devore Hall) to the Academy (previously the Church's responsibility).
 - Indexing the Academy's annual rent escalation to cpi.
 - Resetting Academy meal costs and indexing them to cpi.
 - Making the Academy responsible for the actual cost of the Academy's insurance coverages.

MOTION

THEREFORE, On behalf of the Trustees Committee, and reflective of its unanimous approval at a called meeting on May 22nd, 2021 and Church counsel's satisfactory legal review, I make a motion to: (1) approve the Lease and Shared Facilities Agreement between Mt Bethel United Methodist Church, Inc, Landlord and Mt Bethel Christian Academy, Inc, Tenant of the main Academy Building, otherwise known as Building F, and related Shared Facilities for a term of 20 years under the terms and conditions specifically defined in the Lease and Shared Facilities Agreement document and in the minutes of the Trustee Committee meeting noted above; and (2) authorize Andrew Slavin, Chairman of the Trustees Committee, to execute the lease and any related documentation on behalf of Mt Bethel United Methodist Church, Inc.