Mt. Bethel and the North Georgia Conference of the UMC Reach a Settlement

Frequently Asked Questions...

The settlement agreement we reached with the North Georgia Conference of the UMC brings an end to litigation that began in Cobb Superior Court last September regarding Mt. Bethel’s church property. By its very nature, a settlement agreement represents a compromise on behalf of all parties. Unlike the outcome of litigation in court, there are no clear winners or losers. The leadership of Mt. Bethel—both lay and clergy—is grateful to have reached a mediated solution that bears witness to a spirit of reconciliation and hope for the future. We are indebted to Cobb Superior Court Judge Mary Staley for her willingness to spend several days meeting with the parties and attorneys in mediation, leading to this resolution. We have tried to answer the most frequently asked questions below, but please reach out to lay leadership or clergy if you have additional questions.

What are the terms of the settlement agreement?

How was the agreement reached and how will we carry it out?

What happens next? What does this mean for members?

What are the terms of the settlement agreement?

- At a high level, the settlement agreement resolves a dispute about Mt. Bethel church property.
- The settlement is not about disaffiliation from the UMC, which is a process under church law in the UMC Book of Discipline. To understand more about why we will not vote on disaffiliation, go here.
- The Trustees, the Conference, and the Bishop have agreed to release Mt. Bethel from the Trust Clause (under which the UMC held all Mt. Bethel property in trust; see ¶2501 of the UMC Book of Discipline).
- In turn, Mt. Bethel has agreed to pay the Trustees $13.1 million for all of its property, except intellectual property bearing the cross and flame insignia of the UMC, which will be returned to the Conference.
- Once the terms of the settlement are met, Mt. Bethel will continue to operate in and from its current properties with its financial assets under its current name, but will no longer use the term “United” or “United Methodist.”
- In effect, Mt. Bethel Church will continue operating—with all rights and access to its property and assets, but it will no longer be associated with the United Methodist Church.
How was the agreement reached and how will it be carried out?

- The settlement was negotiated and agreed to by all Parties named in the litigation and their legal representation with the guidance and oversight of Cobb Superior Court Judge Mary Staley. The Parties include:
  - The Trustees of the North Georgia Conference of the UMC (the Trustees)
  - Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church (Mt. Bethel)
  - The North Georgia Conference of the UMC (the Conference)
  - Bishop Sue Haupert Johnson (the Bishop)
  - District Superintendent Jessica Terrell (the D.S.)

- The members of Mt. Bethel who participated to some extent with legal counsel in the mediation include:
  - Ferrell Coppedge, Lay Leader
  - Brian McNeely, Chair of the Finance Committee
  - Andy Slavin, Chair of the Trustees Committee
  - Casey Alarcon, Chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee
  - Dave Perry, Chair of the Administrative Council
  - Jody Ray, Lead Pastor
  - Jonathan Lawson, Executive Pastor

- The settlement represents adequate consideration of the mutual benefits to be obtained by all parties involved, and is intended to settle forever and completely the interests and obligations of and between these parties. *Once effective, the settlement agreement puts an end to the lawsuit.*

- Once the above-named parties approved the basic terms of a settlement agreement on May 4, 2022, it was presented to the Administrative Council of Mt. Bethel the following evening of May 5, 2022 for a “yay” or “nay” vote to accept the terms of the agreement. It was determined by lay leadership that Mt. Bethel representatives could not sign the settlement agreement without a majority “yay” vote from the 50-member Administrative Council.

- The Administrative Council reviewed the settlement agreement in detail and carefully considered each of its motions. This representative body of church laity decided to approve the settlement agreement in order to bring an *end to litigation in court between Mt. Bethel and representatives of the UMC.*

- The majority “yay” vote enabled Mt. Bethel representatives to sign the settlement agreement. A “nay” vote from the Administrative Council would have returned the dispute to litigation in Cobb County Superior Court, where an unknown verdict might not be reached for another 12-36 months.
**What are the next steps? What does this mean for me as a member of Mt. Bethel?**

- As a member of Mt. Bethel, we earnestly hope you will greet this outcome with a peaceful heart, and one that is renewed in hope for the future of our church. We want you to move forward in faith with Mt. Bethel Church!

- Both Mt. Bethel lay and clergy leaders are confident in Mt. Bethel’s future and profoundly grateful for the faithful support of its members and our larger faith community, here in East Cobb and around the globe.

- If you have been coming to Mt. Bethel to worship throughout the past year, you might not notice many changes as the settlement agreement is executed. We will gratefully continue in worship, ministry, missions and outreach.

- Since the dispute with the Conference began, our church has experienced heartbreaks and triumphs, joys and sadness. We know not everyone will be happy with this outcome, but we hope that you can find contentment in a mediated solution that reflects compromise on behalf of everyone involved.

- As we execute the terms of the settlement, we are engaging in a capital campaign to help raise the funds necessary to fulfill the agreement. We humbly urge our members to give toward our Settlement Fund at any level.

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**Going Deeper—How did we get here?**

**How does the settlement work? What does it mean?**

- The settlement agreement is legally binding. It contains motions that stipulate the terms of the agreement for all parties involved.

- In the case of this settlement, the North Georgia Board of Trustees of the UMC (who originally sued Mt. Bethel in court to seize its property and assets) has agreed to release Mt. Bethel from the Trust Clause relinquishing any claim on Mt. Bethel’s property.

- In return, Mt. Bethel will pay the North Georgia Conference $13.1 million.

- At the closing of the settlement when all its terms have been met, Mt. Bethel Church will own its property and assets.

- Also as a result of the agreement, Mt. Bethel will no longer be part of the UMC and will not have the right to use “United” or “United Methodist” in its name, nor can it use the cross and flame insignia of the UMC.
What about voting for disaffiliation? Will that still happen?

- The settlement of the lawsuit filed against Mt. Bethel does not pertain to disaffiliation or a church-wide vote on disaffiliation from the UMC.
- Disaffiliation is a process under church law, specifically ¶2553 of the United Methodist Book of Discipline, and only District Superintendent Jessica Terrell (under the authority of Bishop Sue Haupert-Johnson) can officially call a church-wide vote on disaffiliation.
- Following an affirmative vote of the 50-member Administrative Council in April 2021, Mt. Bethel formally requested that D.S. Terrell call a church-wide vote on disaffiliation. Jessica Terrell declined to call a vote.
- Instead, the North Georgia Conference Board of Trustees declared Mt. Bethel in “exigent circumstances” in summer of 2021 and later sued Mt. Bethel for control of its property and assets in Cobb Superior Court.
- Mt. Bethel filed a countersuit requesting that the Cobb Superior Court return the dispute to church law so that we could proceed with a vote on disaffiliation.
- Because we reached a settlement of the litigation, Mt. Bethel has effectively dropped its counterclaim, just as the Trustees have dropped their lawsuit.
- Under the terms of the settlement, Mt. Bethel will be released from the Trust Clause, under which the UMC previously held all of Mt. Bethel’s property and assets. One major result of the settlement is that Mt. Bethel Church will own its property and assets.
- Also resulting from the settlement, Mt. Bethel will become an independent church no longer affiliated with the UMC.