

Earlier this year, the Jonesboro Church had faithfully followed the disaffiliation process set forth within the United Methodist Book of Discipline and by the Arkansas Annual Conference. The members of the Jonesboro Church had and continue to have valid concerns about the direction of the United Methodist Church, and they rightfully afforded themselves the right to follow their conscience and disaffiliate from the UMC over these concerns, a process that was designed and approved by the UMC. So, in July, over 1300 members of the Jonesboro Church voted on whether to remain in the denomination or disaffiliate. Despite a tremendous push to stop the vote—and a campaign against disaffiliation not seen anywhere in the United States with billboards, newspaper advertisements, social media posts, YouTube videos, and calls and letters to all members—more than two-thirds, in fact almost 70%, of the church membership voted to disaffiliate.

Thereafter, the Arkansas Annual Conference staff confirmed that the Church had met all the requirements to leave the denomination. However, in an unprecedented and shocking move, Conference delegates voted to deny the Church's disaffiliation when they convened in November. Of the more than 2,000 Methodist churches to file, and receive, disaffiliation releases, only five in the entire country, and three in Arkansas, have been denied the ability to disaffiliate.

Following the Conference's rejection of the Jonesboro Church's disaffiliation, the Conference leadership did not formally address the members of the Jonesboro Church, nor did they work to address the members' concerns and confusion as to why their disaffiliation was rejected when hundreds of others across the country had been approved, nor did they strive in any way to quell the obvious chaos and confusion that swirled around their decision to reject the Jonesboro Church's proper disaffiliation. The only action taken by the conference was to send an emissary of the Bishop to speak to Pastor Miles and the Administrative Council of the Jonesboro Church telling them that their only option was to resubmit the disaffiliation for approval at the next annual conference in June of 2023, knowing full well that under the current rules the disaffiliation must be completed by the end of 2023 when the right to disaffiliation under the Discipline ends.

Because the Conference rejected the congregation's lawful effort to disaffiliate, the Church was backed into a corner not contemplated or accounted for within the Book of Discipline. When pressed by the Jonesboro Church, the Annual Conference told the Church's leadership that it would not release the Church unless it negotiated an agreement with the minority of members who had voted to remain affiliated—the "stay group."

Thereafter, the Church's leadership reached out to representatives of the stay group to find out what their demands were and attempted to schedule a mediation with a mediator recommended by the Conference. However, on Friday, December 9, 2022, the outgoing bishop of the Conference, Bishop Gary Mueller, wrote to the Church's leadership:

"I have spent much of the past week trying to facilitate a mediated conversation between members of the two major groups in Jonesboro First United Methodist Church that might result in a win-win solution. It is apparent to me that there is enough difference in perspective that it is not possible at this time."

As a result, and with no direction or guidance from the Conference leadership, the Jonesboro Church scheduled a meeting of its members to discuss the few options left, and interestingly, the first formal response to the Jonesboro Church and its membership since rejecting its disaffiliation request was a letter from the District Superintendent, Rev. John Fleming, informing the Jonesboro Church that only he could authorize a church meeting and he had no intention of doing so. The Conference Leadership, having the responsibility of caring for and shepherding each of the congregations within its jurisdiction, knew that its decisions had sowed chaos, confusion, hurt, and pain within the membership of the Jonesboro Church and simply ignored it, and instead, curtly responded by telling the members that they were not authorized to meet. If the Conference Leadership is not willing to show leadership and compassion to the members of the Jonesboro Church, then how is a church supposed to move forward when its very leaders are stifling its ability to meet and address the issues determining its future. The Conference Leadership completely abdicated its shepherding responsibilities owed to the Jonesboro Church and left them to the wind.

So, on December 15, 2022, the membership of the Jonesboro Church met and leadership presented the congregation with the options available and held a vote. An overwhelming 98% of those in attendance voted against remaining affiliated with the UMC. Over 98% also approved bylaws to govern the Church and a slate of managers authorized to take any steps necessary to protect its property which the Conference began to assert as its own.

After learning of the congregation's vote, the Conference formally responded to the members of the Jonesboro Church a second time only by claiming the Jonesboro Church's property as its own and by suspending Rev. Miles, the Church's pastor for the past 17 years. Now, it has become crystal clear to all who can see, the Arkansas Conference and its leadership are interested in one thing, and one thing only, taking the property of the Jonesboro Church away from it. Make no mistake about it. After rejecting the disaffiliation of the Jonesboro Church, the only formal response from the Conference Leadership to the Jonesboro Church is that you CANNOT meet to discuss this, and the PROPERTY is ours. The Conference Leadership should be ashamed as it has utterly failed to shepherd its flock at the Jonesboro Church, and in so doing has lost its moral right to exercise any authority over it.

At a time when other congregations are focused on the birth of Jesus, the Conference has used its heavy hand to force the Jonesboro Church into court to protect its place of worship and property—some of which it has owned and maintained for over 100 years. Unfortunately, on December 19, 2022, the First United Methodist Church of Jonesboro was forced to file suit to protect the Church's property and disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. The suit was necessitated by the denomination's unprecedented decision to reject the congregation's lawful effort to disaffiliate from the denomination—which is hemorrhaging congregations all across the country. While the Jonesboro Church had hoped to find an agreed-upon way forward, the denomination, through the Arkansas Conference did nothing to diffuse the conflict but instead escalated matters when it laid claim to the church's property and suspended the congregation's pastor, the Reverend John Miles, right before Christmas.

During this legal process, Reverend John Miles, the pastoral and music ministry staff will continue to conduct the extensive worship services and ministry obligations that have made First United Methodist Church one of the fastest-growing churches across the country.