

Ripple Effect

Warren Lathem

March 6, 2022

warrenlathem@gmail.com

When the North Georgia Bishop took her scorched earth approach with Mt. Bethel, she launched a very large stone into the middle of an already troubled pond, known as the North Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The Conference over which she presides is in rapid decline. Her agenda driven appointments have resulted in failure after failure in local churches. Many churches are now having less than half of their former worship attendance and some are much, much less than that. Reductions in giving forced the reduction of the number of districts from 12 to 8 with the Annual Conference taking over all the assets formerly belonging to the various districts. She has surrounded herself with cabinet level appointments filled with theologically aligned clergy, most of whom have not had effective local church ministries. In any other industry she would be deemed inadequate for the task of leading what had been a very effective conference.

It was into that troubled water that she took such a vicious and divisive action against Mt. Bethel, the largest church in her Annual Conference. That story has been told in many other places. Of course, the Southeast Jurisdictional Episcopal Committee did not hold her accountable for obvious violations of both the spirit and law concerning consultation in appointment making. We all knew they would not. When have rogue UMC bishops ever been held accountable?

The only available challenge for the church against this hostile takeover is in secular court where she has forced this case. That is where this case now resides. No one knows what the outcome will be other than this: hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on legal fees that should have been spent on mission.

However, other than the impact of the bishop's actions on Mt. Bethel, what are the ripple effects? Most obvious is the taking of a pastor off the field and placing him on the sideline. While he is appointed there, he has no role. But his salary continues to be paid by the entities responsible. The greatest loss is not the wasted salary, but the wasted year of ministry which appears to be stretching into a second useless year. That can never be recovered. And as of this writing, there is no sign that will change for a long time, especially as the bishop initiated court battle continues to extend.

The ripple effect goes beyond just the year of idleness of ministry by one of the more effective pastors in the conference. There is the case of pulling an Associate Pastor out of a place of effectiveness to throw her into the vacancy created by removing the effective pastor. The Associate is a wonderful person, but she knew that appointment would be most difficult even if the bishop did not. The decline of the Sugarloaf congregation has been so rapid, it has become necessary to put it on a two-point charge (we don't call it that anymore, but that is what it is) appointing an effective church planter to take both churches, in hopes the Sugarloaf church can survive. Further, the Associate is again plucked out of that position and placed into a new one where we trust she can be more effective. How many hundreds of people left the Sugarloaf Church and the UMC because of the capricious actions of the bishop? What kind of life disruption was brought

into the life of the Associate for no good reason and what lasting impact does that have?

More ripples: many United Methodist members in various churches simply walked away upon seeing the nature of the action against Mt. Bethel. For many of them, this was not the first thing that caused them to question their participation in the UMC, but her act was the last thing needed to drive them away.

The ripples extend further. Suddenly many formerly passive churches were forced to ask this question, "If the Bishop will do THAT to Mt. Bethel, WHAT will she do to us? Lay leaders took note in spite of many Progressive pastors trying to obscure the impact of her actions. Now 70+ churches in North Georgia are seeking to disaffiliate. If the February 15 filing deadline set by the Annual Conference Trustees had been publicized and if the Commission on General Conference had given an earlier decision to cancel the General Conference a vast number of churches would have filed for disaffiliation. The Bishop is on record stating she believed no more than 30 churches would leave. Obviously she does not know this Conference. It will be hundreds.

Interestingly, the reasons churches are discussing leaving almost always have nothing to do with human sexuality, the high profile issue at the General Church level. They are talking about a misalignment of mission, decades of ineffective pastoral leadership, the misuse (in their opinion) of their apportionment dollars, the forced closing of local churches, the seizing of local church assets, and a desire for a viable future which appears to no longer be possible in the UMC. They have watched their children leave to go to effective orthodox churches, often independent or loosely aligned with an association of churches. They have observed the sometimes slow and sometimes rapid

exit of their contemporaries to other vital churches in their community. They have observed the politically driven actions of the leadership of the conference in hiding or withholding information that for years was readily available to local churches. They have had to receive and pay the salaries of District Superintendents who have little experience and often no serious effective experience. Some of them have had a new DS assigned and have never met them in over two years! Many discuss the all-consuming institutionalism of the denominational leadership while experiencing either benign neglect or open hostility from that same leadership to the needs of the ministry of the local church. Now many of these most faithful United Methodists gather in sanctuaries for worship, look around and see fewer than 50% of the folks who were there just a few years ago. Some will say this is simply the result of Covid. Certainly some of it is. However, in most churches this downward trend in attendance stretches over multiple years and pastors. They never see a believer's baptism. Confirmation classes have fewer than five or none at all. They are threatened if they do not pay their annual apportionment in full. They are not included in any district or conference decisions, not even consulted. So they want out with their assets to continue ministry in a more effective way. They may not be sure what that looks like, but they know what is current reality is not working.

Yet the ripples extend further. Churches all across the connection look at North Georgia and wonder how could this happen. The strongest Annual Conference in the UMC and the fastest growing AC is now in rapid decline. And the largest church in the AC is attacked by the most powerful person in the conference. They have become privy to some of the lies and distortions of conference leaders made in public forums. And they are saying, "If it could happen in North Georgia, it could

happen to us.” Therefore, calls for disaffiliation have greatly increased in other conferences, even jurisdictions.

Annual conference clergy and lay leadership in other areas have been asking why this was done to Mt. Bethel and could it happen in their conference. Conferences with Traditional bishops, or simply fair-minded bishops, are facing an uncertain future fearing the “North Georgia affect” in the appointment of their next bishop. They see the impact of the episcopal assignment here and fear it will repeat in their conference.

But these ripples do not end at the coastline of the US. African leaders have observed the fiasco of the Mt. Bethel situation and have said, “How can this be? Can we not trust the US church to be ethical and fair? We have been accused by the Progressives of being unethical, yet at Mt. Bethel it is on open display. Do we want to be associated with such an organization?” The ripples have pushed many more of them to start to move headlong toward the Global Methodist Church launching in May.

And finally, the ripple hits me. 50 years of ministry in the UMC. And I cannot wait to walk, no run, away to join the Global Methodist Church. I have served under 7 bishops. Six have been honorable. I will help as many leave the UMC as possible. And I will put my record of faithful service in the UMC up for comparison to anyone. I did my work. Now I walk away. And the ripples continue to move toward distant shores.