

Warren Lathem Responds to the March 31 Letter by Bishop Dease of the UMC North Georgia Conference

Warren Lathem, a former District Superintendent of the North Georgia AC, wrote:

As you know 186 churches filed suit against the North GA AC related to the “Pause” instituted by Bishop Sue in December, 2022 and continued by Bishop Dease at least through today. Below is her letter and interspersed is my response in bold.

Dr. Warren Lathem,
Retired

[NOTE: Warren Lathem’s comments are in Blue Bold. Bishop Dease’s

[#BeUMC | Learn More About The United Methodist Church](#) [More](#)

Menu

Message from Bishop Dease on March 31

3/31/2023

Dear North Georgia United Methodists,

As we approach Palm Sunday and Holy Week, I spent the day today in the South West District with ERT, UMCOR representatives, and local churches responding to tornadoes in our Conference. United Methodists are doing the work of God and it is a blessing.

My heart aches to share that, also today, a lawsuit has been filed against the

North Georgia Conference, its board of trustees, our district superintendents, as well as your previous bishop, and me, your present resident bishop.

The statement from the North GA Wesley Covenant Associate shared publicly:

“The suit requests the North Georgia Bishop, Trustees, and Cabinet to restore the process that was in place last year which allowed 70 churches in our Annual Conference to disaffiliate using a provision (par. 2553) found within the denomination's Book of Discipline. We have repeatedly made this request to Conference leaders since receiving notice of "the pause" on December 28th. Regrettably there appears to be no willingness by leaders to resume that process or to even negotiate. We deeply regret the actions of Annual Conference leaders and the untenable situation in which it places hundreds of churches in our Conference.”

If the Bishop’s heart aches, how does she feel about the heartache of the 186 churches who have been forced to sue their own annual conference in an attempt to simply get the rights and privileges granted in the Book of Discipline. “Do no harm” have become empty words in the mouths of the Conference leadership who have forced this horrible situation on the churches of the annual conference. This could all have been avoided, yet they have perpetuated this evil on these churches. Now the world will see how closed the Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open doors are in North GA. The churches in the lawsuit gave the Chancellor, and all the principals ample opportunity to reverse the grievous act of Bishop Sue. The process was repeatedly delayed by them. Many of us observers believed they would only delay and never had any interest whatsoever in reaching an amicable solution. This proved to be true in spite of repeated opportunities to solve this apart from this horrible situation.

While we review the lawsuit with the appropriate counsel, we will refrain from sharing details, however, we are familiar with the issues. Similarly, a lawsuit has been filed against the conference and its leadership by a church in Augusta.

Some important insight to keep in mind includes:

- The board of trustees, in consultation with the cabinet, the annual conference treasurer, benefits officer, director of connectional ministries, and chancellor, worked diligently to develop, update, and implement a disaffiliation process that would fulfill the requirements of the Book of Discipline and the stated aspirations of the Conference Board of Trustees and the Annual Conference.

Please note, information about the disaffiliation process in North GA only went to pastors in 2022, and then only a few days before the arbitrary deadline for requesting disaffiliation. Most Churches knew nothing as most pastors simply held the information and did not share it with the congregation. The AC certainly had the ability to inform congregations, yet chose not to do so. Why?

Only 70 churches successfully completed disaffiliation at the 2022 annual conference. Of course this was done in spite of the attempt to keep congregations uninformed. Further, remember the legislation for disaffiliation passed at the 2019 General Conference, but in North GA the first opportunity was Annual Conference 2022.

Further, the Bishop, Cabinet, and Trustees declared that no subsequent church could request a Church Conference to vote on Disaffiliation until January, February, 2023 blocking any significant progress.

Then in her famous parting shot, just before Christmas Bishop Sue “Paused” all attempts at disaffiliation until after the 2024 General Conference, thereby effectively eliminating the defined Disciplinary process of paragraph 2553, clearly a violation of the Book of Discipline. The sunset of 2553 is December 31, 2023. One can only surmise, her early statement that only 20-30 small churches would choose to disaffiliate was significantly out of touch as evidenced by 70 in 2022 and the 186 in the referenced lawsuit, and no one knows how many more would have chosen disaffiliation if an open, fair and equitable way forward had been provided in a manner consistent to the Book of Discipline.

Again, one can only surmise the institutionalist horror at seeing perhaps 40 percent of one’s churches simply walking away from the control of the Bishop and Cabinet, along with their millions of assets their members had faithfully provided across the years, some as

many as 200 years, with no funding ever coming from the AC. The loss of assets and perhaps more significantly the loss of apportionment income would have been horrifying, especially for so many in the institution who had shown no significant production of new churches, new assets, or new members. Remember, an institution in perpetual decline has no ability to reverse said decline. 300 churches (possibly) leaving behind 400 churches is a precipitous decline. Like so many of her words, Bishop Sue's declaration of supporting a "gracious exit" were simply a lie. Bishop Dease and the Trustees and Cabinet have reinforced that lie.

One must ask, "Why?" The Annual Conference has something close to \$100,000,000 in cash as well as millions in AC property on the books. The disaffiliating churches would add another \$10-15 million to the coffers. Why in the world would some say the actions of the Conference are financially driven?

While \$100+ million is a huge sum of money, the reality is it won't last long as more and more churches fail and apportionments stop from disaffiliating churches. The bloated institution which is North Georgia UMC, the failure of churches caused by ineffective pastoral and episcopal leadership, and the mass exodus of members results in an organization forced to rely on reserves instead of income. That is a very short and dark future.

Of course, the myth apparently believed by Conference leadership is they can force folks to stay by contravening the Book of Discipline and forcing churches to stay in the UMC. Yet all across the conference new church plants are emerging led primarily by disenfranchised United Methodists whose church has been prevented from even discussing the crisis in the UMC and folks whose pastors assumed an oppositional posture to dialogue. The exodus will only escalate due to the actions of AC leadership and pastoral leadership. The future of the UMC in North Georgia is not a healthy future. Soon, the diagnosis will be "critical." Only reserve funds and funds from the sale of confiscated property will provide a period of life support. Hence, the fear driven "Pause."

- However, the cabinet discovered and observed that many local churches have been misled about the disaffiliation process and have been presented with information about the process, and about The

United Methodist Church and its leadership, that is factually incorrect and defamatory. We have significant concerns about this misinformation and are well aware that it has the potential to do irreparable harm.

The Institutionalists simply do not trust the laity of their own churches to make informed and fair decisions in this matter. These same laity were trusted in all other matters of the local church, District and Conference, but they could not be trusted in this matter.

Was there misinformation floating around? Of course. Apparently the AC determined the leadership and members of their churches are not wise enough to sort through all the good and bad information and reach a rational decision. Whose fault is that...if it were true?

The irrationality of this argument by the bishop is laughable were it not so denigrating and harmful. Teachers and doctors, lawyers, and small business owners, farmers and university professors, presidents of major corporations and musicians, pastors and lay speakers are the ones deemed incapable of making a rational and Spirit led decision in this situation. Some of these churches have managed multi-million dollar budgets for decades, built many beautiful and functional structures, purchased land, relocated, repeated the process, managed the tax laws and compensation for both a single part time pastor and staffs of several dozen. All of this was done without any significant guidance and usually no financial support from the conference. But these same people were deemed incapable of making an informed decision in this matter.

As one said to me recently, “We were treated like we were ignorant, biased, bigoted, hateful, non-Christian, unloving and incapable people. So we left.” This is being repeated by the hundreds, if not thousands in North GA.

- This information presented to members of local churches about disaffiliation has been outside the bounds of normal and acceptable civil discourse. It has not only been false and misleading but has been antithetical to the concept of a gracious exit or a commitment to honoring the mission and ministry of all Christians.

Who sets the bounds for “normal and acceptable civil discourse?” Clearly the leadership of the AC believe only they are capable of setting those. Therefore when a church member who holds no elected

office in the church decides to invite his Sunday School Class to stay late to have a discussion of 2553, the church receives a letter declaring by the DS that they are disqualified from participating in 2553 because they held “a secret meeting.” Apparently that informal, unofficial discussion by Sunday School class members, some of whom had been together for decades “outside the bounds of normal and acceptable civil discourse.” This is simply one example of many of the autocratic definitions employed by the only people apparently capable of setting “bounds of normal and acceptable civil discourse.”

This does not bode well for the denomination. If the laity cannot be trusted because they have lost confidence in their leadership, how can this voluntary association continue? Be sure, in spite of the Trust Clause it is still a voluntary association. The AC may be able to keep the accumulated assets, but millions of donor dollars have already walked away in North Georgia, and millions more will soon follow. One is forced to wonder how folks in positions of responsibility such as the Bishop, Cabinet, and Trustees can be so inept as to not understand this. Or is it they do understand it and the precipitous decline of the AC forces them to make these moves to grab all the assets possible before they get away as well. Are these statements what they refer to as “outside the bounds of normal and acceptable civil discourse?”

I only watched two DS information sessions in local churches. Both, in my opinion, were filled with biased, slanted, even false information. Further, in one of them I observed the DS belittle a member who founded and led the most successful ministry in the church for over 20 years and who has been a faithful Methodist for her whole life. Further, the DS belittled a lay leader who serves as a member of the state legislature treating him as if he were an ignorant and uninformed member. Apparently these actions were within the “bounds of normal and acceptable civil discourse.”

- The process implemented regarding paragraph 2553 was intended to allow congregations an opportunity to take part in a specific path to disaffiliate because, as a matter of conscience, they disagree with the language in the Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality. The agreement requires the Annual Conference and its congregations to engage in the disaffiliation process with integrity and in good faith.

One simply must ask who has shown a lack of integrity and good faith? At least 186 churches believe this to be the actions of the AC and are willing to spend the money, endure the hardship and takes the risk of losing in a last ditch effort to get the AC to engage in a “process with integrity and good faith.” The suit alleges this has not been the case. Now the AC has forced that onto the courts to decide. The truth is the leadership of the Wesley Covenant Association in North Georgia, many local churches and individuals sought repeatedly to have dialogue after the “Pause” went into effect in December, 2022. All attempts failed due to the stonewalling and gaslighting of the episcopacy and cabinet and conference trustees. Four months passed during a very brief timeline for disaffiliation which expires December 31, 2023. The 186 churches were simply allowed no other option. This is fully the fault of the Annual Conference leadership.

- Conference leaders remain committed to handling this matter in a fair, transparent, uniform, and good-faith manner that affirms the one universal church in service to Christ and honors the mission and ministry of all Christians.

This is simply a lie. They have shut down “this matter” by their Draconian actions. At least be transparent enough to admit this. The ministry and mission honored by this leadership is only that which advances their agenda.

- The Conference Board of Trustees and Cabinet in consultation with appropriate leaders are prayerfully exploring the best methods for moving forward and next steps available as set forth in the Book of Discipline. Given the circumstances, this approach is the most gracious available to us.

The churches of North Georgia are simply suing to be able to access the “steps available as set forth in the Book of Discipline.” They have been denied that access by actions that fall far below any common understanding of “gracious.”

The North Georgia Conference will keep you informed as there is more to share about this lawsuit.

Based on previous actions, do not look to the AC to be transparent in this matter. The absence of transparency has precipitated the current horrible situation.

I affirm my commitment to honor and uphold the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church,

If the Bishop means this, make 2553 available to the churches of NGA as required by the Discipline she professes to honor and uphold. Of course, she has committed to uphold the Discipline while actively advocating changing the Discipline to fit her understanding of the faith, which is in fact in conflict with Christian teaching.

to be the best United Methodist bishop I can be, and to faithfully co-labor with you as we fulfill the mission of the Church.

We United Methodists are Easter People. I hope this distraction does not draw anyone away from this Holy season. Easter is coming!

It was in deference to Holy Week that I waited to publish this. Now after celebrating the bodily resurrection of Jesus and a commitment to faithfulness to him, I share the above thoughts. I will not address the “Questions and Answers” the Conference published as an addendum to this letter. That may come at a later date.

Warren Lathem

I give thanks for each congregation in our United Methodist connection.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Robin Dease
Resident Bishop
North Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church

--

Dr. Warren Lathem
President
Venezuela Now, Inc.
President Emeritus
Seminario Wesleyano de Venezuela
VNI

www.venezuelanow.org