

Following the Judicial Council decision regarding the unavailability of Discipline paragraph 2549 for local church disaffiliations, a friend with experience on an annual Conference Board of Trustees emailed me a possible scenario. This is his personal opinion only and he says that it is not without risk:

1. Abandon the church building. This assumes the pastor is cooperating.
2. If it's in the winter season, please winterize the church. Hire a plumber to drain the lines. Use RV antifreeze in toilets, drains, etc.
3. Turn off the utilities. Cancel recurring payments and maintenance agreements.
4. I'm not entirely comfortable with this, but the removable assets of the church belong to the church and as long as it is organized and they can do whatever they want to with them.
5. Put all the keys and the church membership records into a box and ship it to the DS.
6. Send a document to the DS with the signatures of the Church Council officers that the church is no longer used as a place of worship and it is abandoned according to Paragraph 2549.1(b).
7. Ownership of the property will eventually revert to the Conference Trustees
8. Most Conference Boards of Trustees will not be able to handle the sales of more than 5 or 6 abandoned churches in a year without outside assistance. It is very labor intensive.
9. Hire a lawyer and form a not-for-profit corporation. The lawyer is the registered agent. If possible, no previous members of the church should appear on the corporation documents.
10. Some UMC conferences have said that they are not going to sell the building back to the former congregation. I don't think that's legal, but it would be best to avoid that issue if possible.
11. When the annual conference declares that the church is closed, the lawyer can step forward with a purchase offer. I have seen churches sell for much less than the appraised value.
12. Most likely, the Trustees will jump on the offer. Trying to sell an abandoned church takes an inordinate amount of time, effort, and it can be expensive.
13. The Trustees could slow-walk the process, but they would have to explain to the annual conference why they refused a valid offer.
14. The Trustees may decide to list the property or take the property to auction. I don't know why they would do that if they have a valid offer on the table, but they could.
15. In a close-knit community, if the attendees at an auction know that the former members are bidding on the church, the others usually won't bid on it.

16. So, if everything comes together, the former congregation could reoccupy their church building at a highly reduced price.
17. Of course, the risk is that the Conference Trustees could put up roadblocks, find another buyer, try to establish a new congregation in the building or tear the building down (unlikely - that's expensive).