



The United Methodist Church
GREAT PLAINS AREA

9440 E Boston, Suite 160
Wichita, Kansas 67207
800.745.2350
Fax: 316.686.0600
www.greatplainsumc.org

SCOTT J. JONES
Resident Bishop

Testimony Regarding HB 2161—an act concerning churches; relating to disputes involving church congregations

Chairman Barker and Members of the Committee:

I am Scott Jones, Bishop of the Great Plains Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. Before my election as bishop I was associate professor at Southern Methodist University where I taught United Methodist History and Doctrine for 20 years. I wish to urge the Committee not to approve House Bill 2161. Before I state my reasons for urging non-approval, I want to explain how property matters are handled in my denomination. We are a connectional church where certain rights are reserved to the local churches and others are reserved to the Annual Conference and to the bishop. We all serve God together under the rules provided in our *Book of Discipline*. This arrangement began in 1763 with John Wesley in England. Since 1797 the Methodist Church in the United States has specified that local church property is held “in trust” for the whole denomination. The system works extremely well and our congregations are able to buy land, build buildings and sell property under this system. In Kansas and Nebraska, the rights and responsibilities of the whole denomination are represented by myself and the District Superintendents who work under me.

I am concerned that HB 2161, if adopted, would be an attack on our freedom of religion. It would seek to create a Kansas statute which is unconstitutional under the first and fourteenth amendments of the US Constitution. The language of the bill does not provide for the internal rules and polity of our Church to be considered in any property disputes that might arise.

A moral argument for rejecting this bill is that many of our buildings were built with contributions over the last several decades by persons who expected their contributions to benefit the United Methodist Church. We must keep faith with the donors and respect the trust they placed in our denomination.

The bill appears to privilege those denominations that have a congregational polity. It seeks to push churches like mine to become congregational and would ignore our denominational teachings and long-standing practices. If approved, it would be a highly questionable intrusion of this legislature into the internal affairs of our church. It is not at all clear that the statute would stand muster when challenged in court, and I would hate for precious state resources to be spent defending such a bill. I am aware that this bill was considered and rejected two years ago, and I ask that you do so again.

Respectfully submitted,

Scott J. Jones



Wichita
9440 E Boston, Suite 110 • Wichita, KS 67207
800.745.2350 • Fax 316.684.0044

Topeka
4201 SW 15th St. • P.O. Box 4187 • Topeka, KS 66604
877.972.9111 • Fax 785.272.9135

Lincoln
3333 Landmark Cir. • Lincoln, NE 68504
402.464.5994 • Fax 402.464.6203

www.GreatPlainsUMC.org