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**One Hundred and Six Churches File Suit Against the Florida Annual Conference
for Egregiously Breaching their Fiduciary Duties | July 2022**

[The National Center for Life and Liberty]

[CLEARWATER, FL, JULY 2022] — One hundred and six United Methodist churches filed suit in Bradford County in the State of Florida today against the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The lead plaintiff is Grace United Methodist Church in Lawtey, Florida, founded in 1822 as a Methodist Episcopal church.

Grace United Methodist Church has been told that they cannot leave the United Methodist Church unless they pay the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church a lump sum amount representing the current and future liabilities of the Florida Annual Conference. Grace United Methodist Church's members, like so many of the other plaintiffs' members, have paid for and have maintained these church properties through funds raised in their local churches.

The lawsuit alleges that the "Council of Bishops and [Bishop Kenneth Carter] . . . [refuse] to "to abide by and enforce the doctrinal positions in the Book of Discipline, effectively shifting the theology in the practice of The UMC despite the Book of Discipline explicitly rejecting the doctrinal positions it encourages and allows."

Attorney David Gibbs III, lead attorney for the churches, stated, "I am appalled at the behavior of the Florida Annual Conference and their complete indifference to the harm that they are inflicting on these churches and their disregard for Florida law. We are confident that a Florida jury will remove the Conference's hold on these churches' properties, releasing them from this oppression."

The lawsuit alleges that the "[Florida] Annual Conference has taken the position that it is entitled to keep [Grace United Methodist Church's] Property—which was owned and paid for . . . long before The UMC and the Annual Conference ever existed—unless Grace . . . pays a substantial payment of money as unilaterally determined by the Annual Conference Defendants."

The churches tried to settle this matter with the Florida Annual Conference. Speaking for the Annual Conference and Bishop, the Chancellor categorically refused any pre-suit negotiations forcing the plaintiffs to seek relief from the court. The churches believe the court will invalidate the trust clause releasing their properties due to the fact that the Florida Annual Conference, Bishop Carter, and Treasurer Craig Smelser are egregiously breaching their fiduciary duties.