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Descendants of freed slaves fight to keep historic black church

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By Ron Cassie

In 1878, near Jefferson, Md., in one of the state's first communities founded by freed slaves, African-American citizens bought the land where they soon built their own "colored" school, church and cemetery.

The first church services were held in the schoolhouse in the mid-1880s. In 1899, members erected the simple, wood-framed, steepled Sunnyside Methodist Episcopal Church that still stands. The school remained in use until desegregation.

Today, descendants of those freed slaves, the 30 remaining members of the congregation, are fighting the United Methodist Church in court to keep possession of the historic church, the former school, a community hall now and the cemetery where more than 100 of their ancestors are buried.

In late 2008, in a dispute over the church's future and its increasing apportionment payments, the Sunnyside flock renounced its affiliation with the United Methodist Church. Hoping to reorganize as an independent, Bible-centered community church, congregation board members are now defendants in a court action brought by the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church for failing to vacate the church grounds.

The one-acre property is valued at \$150,000, according to the Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation.

"It's been such an ugly, ugly situation," said Roxanne Weedon Thrasher, who has both sets of grandparents buried in the cemetery and whose great-grandfather John T. Weedon helped found the school and church, according to county records. She added that her family's name, Weedon, is derived from Wheaton, the name of the slave-holding family that held her ancestors.

"Everyone in this church, I'm related to. We look across the pews and we see our cousins. It's our ancestors who bought this land, built this church, built this school, and made all the repairs over the years -- never even asking the Methodist Church for a loan," Thrasher said. "Every year, we've paid our apportionment in full. We our very proud people and we know our history."

Thrasher's ancestors chose the name of the church from a phrase by one of the founders, who called the church "a light on the sunny side of the mountain."

The community came to be called Sunnyside and by 1916 the congregation prospered enough to have paid off the mortgage. That the land is deeded to the Sunnyside congregation board is not in question, said Shaun Lane, spokesman for the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church.

However, according to the United Methodists' Book of Discipline, the denomination's guiding document, "All properties of the United Methodist local churches and other United Methodist agencies and institutions are held, in trust, for the benefit of the entire denomination, and ownership and usage of the church property is subject to the Discipline."

In other words, because the church was formed as a Methodist Episcopal Church and has remained a United Methodist Church since 1968, when the Evangelical United Brethren Church joined with the Methodist Church, the Baltimore-Washington Conference claims ownership of the property.

Thrasher said the original cause of the dispute involved a district supervisor and former pastor named to lead Sunnyside, part of a four-church charge. Both the district supervisor and pastor, the congregation leadership believed, intended to move the congregation to a larger, nearby United Methodist church and use the Sunnyside property for non-worship purposes.

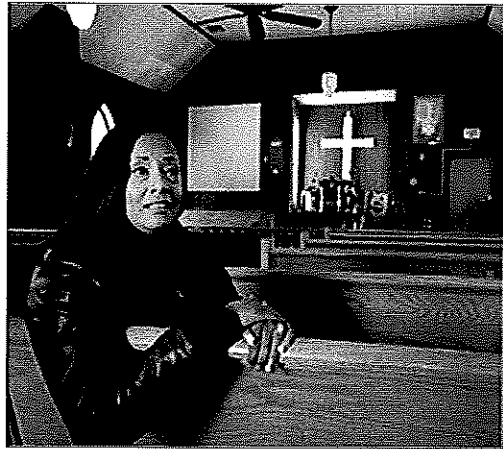


Photo by Bill Green

Sunnyside Church, on Mountville Road, wants to secede from the United Methodist Church. Shown is Roxanne Weedon Thrasher, a member and trustee of the small congregation.

Lane strongly disputed that claim.

Thrasher said the Sunnyside leadership feared if the church was shuttered, the property would be sold or fall into disrepair.

"Now, because we want to leave, you're telling me you're going to take our property," Thrasher asked rhetorically. "Our families were baptized in that church, married in that church and are buried there."

In 2009, Bishop John R. Schol of the Baltimore-Washington conference, in a letter to attorney Thomas Starnes, of the Washington law firm of Drinker, Biddle and Reath, stated that "Sunnyside UMC no longer serves the purpose for which it was organized and incorporated" because the congregation had left the United Methodist Church.

Schol stated further, "Therefore, I consent to having the Conference Board of Trustees assume possession and control of all of Sunnyside's property, real and personal, tangible and intangible property."

The Baltimore-Washington Conference appears to have Maryland annotated code in its favor. In the 1970s, legislation was passed stating that "all assets owned by any Methodist Church, including any former Methodist Episcopal Church ... shall be held by the trustees of the church in trust for the United Methodist Church."--

Two efforts at mediation have failed to resolve the conflict, according to Erika Cole, attorney for the Sunnyside leaders.

A court date is set for Oct. 19.

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