

STATEMENT ON HOUSE BILL 1554
FREDERICK COUNTY: RELIGIOUS CORPORATIONS: RETENTION OF
ASSETS BY LOCAL CHURCHES
Before The
HOUSE ECONOMIC MATTERS COMMITTEE
Tuesday, March 30, 2010
1:00 P.M.

Chairman Davis, Delegate Stull and Members of the Committee:

I, Erika Cole, stand before you today, representing Sunnyside Church, a religious corporation located in Frederick County, Maryland. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak here today regarding this Delegation Bill.

I am here to testify regarding the great significance of this Church and its property both to Frederick County and the State of Maryland. Sunnyside Church is located in the community created as Sunnyside, also now known as Mountville, and is one of the first communities established by former slaves of the Civil War. Understandably, one of the goals of the newly freed slaves was to be able to cultivate their own community where they could enjoy the benefits of an emancipated people. These freed slaves looked forward to what many people take for granted today; the right to own their own land, the right to educate their children; the right to acquire possessions and pass them down to their families. Now, due to an antiquated, outdated statute in Maryland, the descendants of these first freed slaves stand to lose one of the only remaining ties they have to their brave ancestors; their land.

In 1976, several laws were passed in Maryland; including but not limited to, additions to the Maryland code dedicated to religious corporations. One of the sections added granted the United Methodist Church uncontested authority over individual property rights. This section, passed in 1976, provides that any Church that has any affiliation with the Methodist movement, even prior to its inception in 1968, is subject to strict property laws. These laws effectively suffocate a local Church's ability to make its own religious decisions while maintaining title to its property. If a Church, affiliated with the Methodist movement decides on its own volition to leave the Methodist movement for religious reasons, they are penalized by the denomination taking all personal and real property of the local church. The power the denomination has over property in the State of Maryland is even greater than that of the State. This denomination can seize all of the assets of a local disaffiliated Church without question or compensation. With the way the statute currently reads, the legislature is providing the Church with the legal authority to do this. Today you have the opportunity to right this wrong.

Because of this statute, Sunnyside Church is in a legal battle to hold onto their historic property. Sunnyside Church is made up of approximately 30 members, and the Church, its Pastor, and Trustees have been sued by the United Methodist Church and the Baltimore-Washington Conference who are trying to take this property from the local

church. The Sunnyside United Methodists Church and Church members are being sued by the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church, Inc., a worldwide organization, with approximately 8,000,000 lay-members in the United States alone.

The members of this small family Church can trace their familial lineage to persons who helped establish the community known as Sunnyside. Adjacent to the Church is the gravesite where many of their ancestors are buried. Members of the Veteran Affairs Administration are in support of Sunnyside Church because of the many veterans that are buried at the Church and cared for by its members.

You can help right an obvious wrong today by voting yes for HB 1554, a Frederick County delegation bill that mirrors an existing statute in Garrett County, and helping to ensure that Sunnyside can keep its small Church that that their ancestors acquired over 100 years ago.