JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

DECISION NO. 1526

IN RE: Decision of Law by Bishop Dottie Escobedo-Frank of the California-Pacific Annual Conference Regarding the Closure of La Trinidad United Methodist Church Pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b) of the Book of Discipline (2020/2024)

DIGEST

The decisions of law on the six questions presented to the bishop are affirmed. The California-Pacific Annual Conference correctly followed the requirements of ¶ 2549.4(b) in closing La Trinidad United Methodist Church under exigent circumstances.

JURISDICTION

The Judicial Council has jurisdiction to review questions of law pursuant to ¶ 2609.6 of the *2020/2024 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. The request for decision of law to Bishop Dottie Escobedo-Frank was procedurally proper under Judicial Council Decisions (JCD) 1329 and 1390. Therefore, the council has jurisdiction to address Bishop Escobedo-Frank's decision.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

During the 2026 session of the California-Pacific Annual Conference, Bishop Escobedo-Frank was asked to issue a decision of law on six questions related to the closure of La Trinidad United Methodist Church. The questions were asked in connection with the annual conference's required vote to approve the closure pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b). The bishop issued her decision of law on July 15, 2026.

The questions presented and the bishop's decisions regarding each were as follows:

Question 1: When a church is closed under ¶2549.4b of the *2020/2024 Book of Discipline*, does this close the church corporation as part of the church's closure? And if so, does the assignment of real property to an intangible corporation in the declaration of church closure on January 13, 2026 make the closure invalid, along with all the annual conference actions which followed and also mean that the church remains open under its leadership prior to the declaration of closure?

Bishop's Decision of Law: An action under *Discipline*, ¶ 2549.4(b), is an *ad interim* exigent-circumstances closure and ecclesiastical property-protection measure. Upon the required consent of the resident bishop, a majority of the district superintendents, and the appropriate district board of church location and building, all real and personal, tangible and intangible property of the local church immediately vests in the CBOT. When the Annual Conference next meets, it separately decides whether formally to close the local church.

That ecclesiastical closure does not, solely by operation of Church law, dissolve a separately incorporated local church under civil law. *Discipline*, ¶ 2506.1, makes disciplinary provisions concerning property and church corporations subject to conformity with applicable local law. The *Declaration* itself expressly preserves the corporation's continuing civil existence:

> "[N]othing in this declaration of closure should be construed to affect the continuing existence and operation of the Local Church's nonprofit religious corporation, 'PRIMERA IGLESIA METODISTA, "LA TRINIDAD," INCORPORATED,' nor to affect the Corporation's title to the real property."
> Exhibit A.

The *Declaration* simultaneously states that beneficial and equitable ownership of the real property is vested in the CBOT, while record title may remain temporarily in the corporation pending conveyance or other action directed by the CBOT. Exhibit A. This distinction is consistent with *Discipline*, ¶¶ 2504 and 2538, under which property held in a local church's corporate name remains subject to the *Discipline* and is held in trust for the local church and The United Methodist Church.

The corporation's continuing civil existence does not preserve the prior directors' authority under Church law to control property vested in the CBOT. Under *Discipline*, ¶ 2529.1(b)-(d), an incorporated local church must operate in conformity with the *Discipline*, may not act contrary to the purposes of the Annual Conference or denomination, and may not sever its connectional relationship without Annual Conference consent.

Judicial Council Decision 1490 (2023), interpreting the predecessor provision now codified as ¶ 2549.4(b), affirmed an *ad interim* exigent-circumstances closure, the immediate vesting of the local church's property in the

annual conference board of trustees, and the Annual Conference's subsequent formal closure.

Question 1's reference to an "intangible corporation" misreads both ¶ 2549.4(b) and the *Declaration*. In ¶ 2549.4(b), "tangible and intangible" modifies "property"; it does not describe a corporation or the recipient of title. The *Declaration* did not vest La Trinidad's property in the corporation. It vested beneficial and equitable ownership in the CBOT while allowing record title to remain temporarily in the corporation for civil-law implementation. The *Declaration's* later reference to ¶ 2549.3(b) uses the predecessor numbering of the provision now codified as ¶ 2549.4(b).

The continued civil existence of the corporation therefore does not invalidate the January 13 closure, the property vesting, or the Annual Conference's later formal closure. Nor does it restore the church, its governance, or its property to the leadership serving before the *Declaration*.

Accordingly, closure of La Trinidad as an organized local United Methodist church did not automatically dissolve its civil corporation, and the *Declaration* did not make the property assignment alleged in Question 1.

Ruling on Question 1: No.

Question 2: Is the declaration of church closure under exigent circumstances invalid because the declaration makes assignments of the church's assets to entities other than the annual conference board of trustees in violation of ¶2549.4b which states in part (emphasis added): "In such case, title to *all* the real and personal, tangible and intangible property of the local church shall *immediately* vest in the annual conference board of trustees. . . ."? And if the declaration of church closure on January 13, 2026 was invalid, are all the annual conference actions which followed invalid and the church remains open under its leadership prior to the declaration of closure?

Bishop's Decision of Law:

Question 2 assumes that the *Declaration* assigned La Trinidad's assets to entities other than the CBOT. The *Declaration* does not do so. It states that "all real and personal property of the Local Church is vested in the Conference's Board of Trustees" and that "all beneficial and equitable ownership of the real property is vested in the Conference Board of Trustees," notwithstanding that record title may remain temporarily in the corporation pending conveyance or other action directed by the CBOT. Exhibit A.

That language follows *Discipline*, ¶ 2549.4(b). Temporary retention of record title for civil-law implementation is not an assignment of beneficial ownership to another entity. See *Discipline*, ¶ 2506.1.

The assignment on which Question 2 depends therefore did not occur. Judicial Council Decision 1113 (2009) holds that an allegation contained in a question is not self-proving and that the Judicial Council is not a fact-finding body when the record contradicts the asserted premise.

Decision 33 (1946) and Memorandum 799 (1997) establish that moot and hypothetical questions must be identified as such but should not receive substantive answers. Decision 1514 (2024) likewise holds that a question disconnected from the action actually taken is moot and hypothetical; JCD 1372 (2019) directs that, once a question is found improper, the ruling should state the rationale without an alternative disposition on the merits.

The second part of Question 2—whether all subsequent Conference actions are invalid and La Trinidad remains open under its former leadership—is contingent upon the same nonexistent assignment and presents no independent controversy.

Accordingly, Question 2 rests on an erroneous factual premise and is moot and hypothetical.

Ruling on Question 2: Moot and hypothetical; no substantive ruling is made.

Question 3: Was La Trinidad United Methodist Church really closed on January 13, 2026 since it continued to have worship services through at least January 25, 2026 and the annual conference continued to appoint a pastor to the church through at least January 15, 2026? And if it was not really closed on January 13, 2026, are all the annual conference actions which followed invalid and the church remains open under its leadership prior to the declaration of closure?

Bishop's Decision of Law: The *Declaration* placed La Trinidad in *ad interim* closure under *Discipline*, ¶ 2549.4(b). Under that provision, the required church authorities may declare exigent circumstances, immediately vest the local church's property in the CBOT, and place the church in interim closure pending the Annual Conference's subsequent decision whether formally to close it.

The object of the closure was La Trinidad's ecclesiastical status as **a chartered, organized local United Methodist church**. Paragraph 259.5 equates a "chartered" church with an "organized" local church and provides for that status through a constituting process supervised by the district superintendent. Closure under ¶ 2549 terminates that organized status; it does not require the immediate cessation of every act of worship, pastoral care, outreach, or ministry associated with the congregation or its property.

The *Discipline* expressly distinguishes a chartered local church from a mission congregation or new-church ministry. A mission congregation may operate

for an extended period without becoming chartered, particularly when it serves a strategic cultural or language population or requires continuing Conference support. The bishop may appoint a pastor to gather persons for Bible study, outreach, community building, and worship before a new church is formally constituted. *Discipline*, ¶ 259.1-.3.

Even accepting the assertions that worship services continued through January 25, 2026, and that an appointment record continued through January 15, those circumstances do not establish that La Trinidad remained open as the same chartered local church. They are consistent with transitional pastoral care and the continuation of United Methodist mission and ministry under Conference supervision. Continuation of ministry is not continuation of the former charter, governance, or control of assets.

This distinction is reflected in ¶ 2549. The ordinary closure procedure requires a plan for the future use of the church property and a plan for transfer of the local church's membership. For a closed urban church, ¶ 2549.8 directs the use of sale proceeds for new or existing ministries in urban transitional communities and permits resources to continue ministry with the poor. Closure may therefore preserve and redirect a congregation's missional legacy rather than terminate ministry in the community.

Judicial Council Decision 1490 (2023), interpreting the predecessor provision now codified as ¶ 2549.4(b), affirmed the validity of both an *ad interim* exigent-circumstances closure and the Annual Conference's subsequent formal closure. It holds that the Annual Conference makes the formal ecclesiastical determination whether the local church is to be closed.

The California-Pacific Annual Conference later adopted REC 26-19 and formally closed and discontinued La Trinidad. That action completed the process contemplated by ¶ 2549.4(b). Continued worship or ministry through Nueva Esperanza does not negate either the *ad interim* or formal closure because Nueva Esperanza may operate as a distinct mission or successor ministry without continuing La Trinidad's former chartered status.

Consequently, La Trinidad was closed as an organized local United Methodist church. Continued worship, pastoral leadership, and Hispanic ministry do not invalidate the closure, nullify the Annual Conference's subsequent actions, or restore the former local church governance.

Ruling on Question 3: Yes, La Trinidad was closed. No, the continued ministry does not invalidate the closure or subsequent Conference actions.

Question 4: Do the various legal actions taken by the annual conference in civil courts around the same time as the declaration church closure under exigent circumstances show that the annual conference was using ¶2549.4b in an illegal

manner to remove church officers which the church conference on October 19, 2025 had voted to retain? And if so, are all the annual conference actions which followed invalid and the church remains open under its leadership prior to the declaration of closure?

Bishop's Decision of Law:

The civil legal actions taken by the California-Pacific Annual Conference and the CBOT do not establish that ¶ 2549.4(b) was used illegally to remove La Trinidad's officers. Rather, those actions were within the express disciplinary authority of the CBOT to protect Annual Conference property and rights.

Upon a valid exigent-circumstances declaration, *Discipline*, ¶ 2549.4(b), immediately vests all real and personal, tangible and intangible property of the local church in the CBOT. The CBOT may then hold or dispose of that property in its sole discretion, subject to the Annual Conference's standing rules.

Once the property vested, *Discipline*, ¶ 2512.4, expressly authorized the CBOT to "intervene and take all necessary legal steps to safeguard and protect the interests and rights of the annual conference" in matters involving property and property rights. Paragraph 2509.2 likewise authorizes a denominational unit empowered to hold title or enforce trusts to bring suit in its own name to protect denominational interests. Seeking an injunction, recovering transferred funds, securing accounts, or obtaining judicial recognition of the CBOT's authority falls within those powers.

Even assuming that the October 19, 2025 church conference validly voted to retain particular local officers, that action did not place those officers beyond the operation of ¶ 2549.4(b). Under *Discipline*, ¶ 2529.1(b)-(d), a local church and its corporation must operate in compliance with the *Discipline* and may not act contrary to the purposes of the Annual Conference or denomination. Once the property vested in the CBOT, former local officers could not continue exercising church-law authority over those assets merely because they had previously been elected or retained.

The legal proceedings were therefore not a substitute disciplinary process for removing local officers under ¶ 2531. They were measures to enforce the CBOT's vested property rights. Any resulting loss of the former officers' control over bank accounts, funds, or other property was a consequence of the disciplinary vesting under ¶ 2549.4(b), not proof that the closure procedure was invoked for an unauthorized purpose.

Decision 1490 (2023) confirms that ¶ 2549.4(b)'s consent requirements are built-in safeguards against overreach and that, when those requirements are followed, the requirements of the *Discipline* are satisfied. The decision also

affirmed the interim and final closure and the vesting of local church property in the annual conference board of trustees.

Judicial Council Decision 1461 (2023) further affirms that an annual conference board of trustees may dispose of the property of a closed local church, subject to the *Discipline*, applicable restrictions, and civil law. Whether any particular corporate filing or court action complied with California law is a civil-law question governed by *Discipline*, ¶ 2506.1, and is not determined merely from the fact that legal proceedings were commenced.

Therefore, the Conference's legal actions were authorized means by which the CBOT could secure, recover, and protect property vested in it. They do not invalidate the *Declaration*, the subsequent formal closure, or the related actions of the Annual Conference.

Ruling on Question 4: No.

Question 5: Does the resolution of discontinuance approved by the California-Pacific annual conference on June 19, 2026 coupled with the declaration of church closure under exigent circumstances on January 13 constitute an illegal way to take control of La Trinidad's assets since the church in fact remains open because the membership of the congregation is primarily being transferred to Nueva Esperanza United Methodist Mission that is operating at the same location and with the same pastor as La Trinidad United Methodist Church? And if so, are all the annual conference actions which followed invalid and the church remains open under its leadership prior to the declaration of closure on January 13?

Bishop's Decision of Law:

The *Declaration* and the Annual Conference's June 19, 2026 action were the two successive steps contemplated by *Discipline*, ¶ 2549.4(b): first, an *ad interim* declaration that immediately vested the local church's property in the CBOT; and second, a decision by the Annual Conference at its next session whether formally to close the church.

The *Declaration* expressly vested La Trinidad's real and personal property in the CBOT. The CBOT then appointed corporate directors and officers and authorized protective financial and legal action, including action through the West District Union when necessary. *See* Exhibit B. As explained in the ruling on Question 4, those measures were consistent with *Discipline*, ¶ 2512.4.

Judicial Council Decision 1490 (2023) confirms that the Annual Conference is the proper forum for challenging an interim exigent-circumstances closure and must decide whether to approve or disapprove formal closure. Here, REC 26-19 was presented, debated, and adopted after the

Conference heard arguments concerning both the closure and the preservation of the assets for continuing Hispanic ministry in East Los Angeles.

Question 5 conflates continuity of mission with continuity of the same chartered local church. Even assuming that most former La Trinidad members transferred to Nueva Esperanza, worshiped at the same location, and were served by the same pastor, those facts would not establish that La Trinidad remained open under its former charter and governance.

Under *Discipline*, ¶ 259.1-.3, a mission congregation may serve a strategic cultural or language population, receive continuing Conference support, and conduct Bible study, outreach, community building, and worship before becoming a chartered local church. A chartered church is separately constituted under ¶ 259.5-.9.

The closure provisions likewise contemplate continuity of ministry. Paragraph 2549.2(a) requires planning for future use of the property and transfer of membership, and ¶ 2549.8 directs proceeds from a closed urban church toward new or existing ministries in urban transitional communities. The continuation of Hispanic ministry through Nueva Esperanza is therefore consistent with, rather than contradictory to, La Trinidad's closure.

The record identifies Rev. Ruben Esponda as clergy of "Nueva Esperanza UM Mission, formerly La Trinidad" and reports that recovered funds were designated for long-term Hispanic ministry, pastoral leadership, Nueva Esperanza, affordable senior housing, and a future United Methodist worship space in East Los Angeles.

Judicial Council Decision 1461 (2023) confirms that the CBOT may administer or dispose of closed-church property subject to the *Discipline*, Annual Conference directions, applicable restrictions, and civil law. Continuing La Trinidad's missional legacy through Nueva Esperanza therefore does not demonstrate that the closure was a pretext for improperly acquiring assets.

Accordingly, neither the *Declaration* nor the June 19 formal closure was an illegal means of taking control of La Trinidad's assets. Nueva Esperanza's continuation of worship and Hispanic ministry does not preserve La Trinidad's former charter, governance, or property rights. There is, therefore, no basis for invalidating subsequent Annual Conference actions or restoring control to the leadership serving before the *Declaration*.

Ruling on Question 5: No.

Question 6: If the closure of the church under exigent circumstances on January 13, 2026, was invalid for any reason, then is the closure of the church by the Cal-Pac annual conference session on January 19, 2026 [sic] also invalid since it could

not be brought under ¶ 2549.4b and none of the other provisions for church closure in ¶ 2549 were followed either?

Bishop's Decision of Law:

Question 6 is expressly conditional. It asks whether the Annual Conference's formal closure would be invalid **if** the January 13, 2026, *ad interim* exigent-circumstances closure were invalid. That predicate assumption has been rejected in the rulings on Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5.The required authorities consented under *Discipline*, ¶ 2549.4(b), La Trinidad was placed in *ad interim* closure, its property vested in the CBOT, and the Annual Conference completed the prescribed process by adopting REC 26-19.

After the Annual Conference formally approved closure, the Judicial Council treated as moot and hypothetical a conditional question concerning the asserted basis for the earlier exigent-circumstances determination. *See* JCD 1490 (2023). Decision 33 (1946), Memorandum 799 (1997), and JCD 1514 (2024) require such a question to be identified without a substantive answer.

Question 6 also misstates the date of the Annual Conference action as January 19, 2026. The formal closure occurred on June 19, 2026, when the Annual Conference adopted REC 26-19. Because the assumed invalidity did not occur and has been rejected in the preceding rulings, Question 6 presents no actual controversy.

Ruling on Question 6: Moot and hypothetical; no substantive ruling is made.

The Judicial Council acknowledges that the briefs of *amicus curiae* contain detailed factual statements regarding the continuation of ministry and worship services at La Trinidad United Methodist Church. They also discuss facts related to attempts to remove officers of the local church and a separate civil court action. The factual record before the council is the record submitted with the bishop's report of her decision of law. While additional factual material cannot be presented through briefs (Memoranda 1102 and 1110), the council views the proffered additional facts on the issues of actual closure, votes to remove officers, and the separate court action as irrelevant to whether the annual conference complied with ¶ 2549.4b, which is its function in reviewing the issues of church law presented.

An Oral Hearing was conducted via Zoom on October 22nd. Bishop Dottie Escobedo-Frank; Chancellor Lori A, Meadors; Moonyoung Lee; Dean of the Cabinet, and Paige Eaves, Assistant to the Bishop appeared on behalf of the respondent. Cesar Aranda; Rev. Richard R. Bentley Jr.; Linda Godkin; Dana Robertson; Liz Roark; Maria Serret; Jason Takagi; and Attorney Julie Sylva appeared on behalf of the petitioner.

ANALYSIS & RATIONALE

The Judicial Council approaches its review of the bishop's decision of law in the context of connectionalism:

> United Methodists throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission. ¶ 125.

Bishop Escobedo-Frank referred to this connectional covenant in a general way when she received the request for decision of law during the annual conference session: "This part of our process is our checks and balances." That statement reinforces the Church's commitment to accountability at every level:

> In covenant with God and with each other: … We commit ourselves to full equity and accountability in our relationships, structures, and responsibilities for the denomination. *Id.*

Local churches are within this connectional covenant of accountability:

> The local church is a connectional society of persons … Such a society of believers, being within The United Methodist Church and subject to its *Discipline*, is also an inherent part of the church universal, …¶ 203.

The role of the Judicial Council thus includes the review of processes to determine whether a part of the Church has complied with applicable requirements. Here, that review is as to a decision of

law based on whether an annual conference has followed the requirements of ¶ 2549.4(b) in particular, and the *Discipline* as a whole, including the Constitution.

Paragraph 2549.4(b) of the *Discipline* states as follows:

> 4. Ad Interim *Procedures* - …
>
> *b)* At any time between sessions of annual conference, if the presiding bishop, the majority of the district superintendents, and the appropriate district board of church location and building all consent, they may, in their sole discretion, declare that exigent circumstances exist that require immediate protection of the local church's property, for the benefit of the denomination. In such case, title to all the real and personal, tangible and intangible property of the local church shall immediately vest in the annual conference board of trustees who may hold or dispose of such property in its sole discretion, subject to any standing rule of the annual conference. Exigent circumstances include, but are not limited to, situations where a local church no longer serves the purpose for which it was organized or incorporated (¶¶ 201-204) or where the local church property is no longer used, kept, or maintained by its membership as a place of divine worship of The United Methodist Church. When it next meets, the annual conference shall decide whether to formally close the local church.

In JCD 1490, the Judicial Council discussed the predecessor version of ¶ 2549.4(b):

> The use of ¶ 2549.3(b) has built-in safeguards; it requires the bishop, a majority of the district superintendents, and the appropriate district board of church location and building, all consent to interim closure provided that all three, in their sole discretion, declare that exigent circumstances exist requiring the immediate protection of the church property. …
>
> It is the annual conference that makes the formal decision to close a local church (¶¶ 2549.2(c); 2549.3(b)), and it is the annual conference that must consent to a local church severing its ties with the United Methodist Church (¶ 2529.1(b)(3)). In requiring that the annual conference members approve the formal closure of that local church, ¶ 2549.3(b) leaves open the possibility that the annual conference could reject formal closure, and an implicit part of the consideration of that question includes whether interim closure was appropriate. …
>
> … these requirements are intended to protect against overreach, and if they are followed, then the requirements of the Discipline have been satisfied.

Those safeguards remain, and the Judicial Council's review is focused on whether they occurred.

The delegate requesting the decision of law from Bishop Escobeo-Frank filed an amicus

brief in which she states that "[i]n JCDs 1507, 1512, 1517 and 1518 the Judicial Council has established a precedent that the Judicial Council can look beyond the form of the *Discipline* in ¶ 2549 [whether that paragraph] was properly followed so as to also inquire into underlying questions in determining whether a church closure – especially through exigent circumstances – was proper."

The Judicial Council disagrees with that characterization of the cited decisions. Each of the decisions analyzed attempts to use ¶ 2549 as a means for a local church to disaffiliate. In JCD 1512, the Judicial Council did make a general statement about exigent circumstances as follows:

> One cannot create exigent circumstances and then use those manufactured circumstances to act. No exigent circumstances have been alleged that would activate the terms of ¶ 2549.3(b) for the Judicial Council to evaluate.

That ruling remains, but it does not change the focus of the Judicial Council's review.

In JCD 1517, the council noted that its scope of review is "whether the resolution to close Embrace UMC is consistent with ¶ 2549 as construed in Decision 1512." And in JCD 1518, the council ruled that ¶ 2549 did not apply to the departure process of the Mississippi Annual Conference, reiterating Decisions 1512 and 1517: "In Decisions 1512 and 1517, the Judicial Council ruled that ¶ 2549 cannot be used as a means of disaffiliation, separation, or departure of a local church from The United Methodist Church."

As the rulings in Decisions 1507, 1512, 1517 and 1518 indicate, the Judicial Council decides matters in the context of provisions of the *Discipline*. It does not look beyond "the form of the *Discipline* in ¶ 2549." While attempts to act contrary to ¶ 2549, including ¶ 2549.4(b), may be evaluated in the context of the whole of the *Discipline*'s provisions as was done in Decisions 1507, 1512, 1517 and 1518, the scope of review of the Judicial Council as to issues of law is within the context of the particular provisions at issue, including the Constitution. There are situations in

which an annual conference's application of ¶ 2549.4(b) is constrained, and, in those situations, the Judicial Council will not second-guess the judgment of the annual conference if the requirements of ¶ 2549.4(b) are properly invoked, followed, and approved by the members of the annual conference session where the closure is approved. To the extent Decisions 1490, 1507, 1512, 1517 and 1518 imply otherwise, we modify those holdings.

At the oral hearing in this matter, the council heard from one person speaking against the bishop's decision who stated that he did not disagree that the bishop and annual conference had complied with the form of ¶ 2549.4(b); rather, he asked that the council look beyond the form of what was done. However, as noted above, that request is beyond the authority of the council in the circumstances of this matter.

In the context of the foregoing, the council turns to the bishop's six decisions of law.

Question 1:

The Judicial Council affirms the bishop's decision on Question 1. The bishop accurately characterizes ¶ 2549.4(b) as an "*ad interim* exigent-circumstances closure and ecclesiastical property-protection measure." The bishop further properly identifies the persons required to consent to invocation of ¶ 2549.4(b). Upon the required consent of the resident bishop, a majority of the district superintendents, and the appropriate district board of church location and building, all real and personal, tangible and intangible property of the local church immediately vests in the annual conference board of trustees. When the annual conference next meets, it separately decides whether to formally close the local church.

The Judicial Council further agrees that what the bishop refers to as an "ecclesiastical closure" "does not, solely by operation of Church law, dissolve a separately incorporated local church under civil law." Paragraph 2506 provides the connection between The United Methodist

Church's "church law" and secular law. Paragraph 2506 is based upon the connectional polity of the denomination discussed above as well as the "trust clause" provisions of ¶¶ 2501-2505.

Paragraph 2506.1 confirms this connection:

> All provisions of the *Discipline* relating to property, both real and personal, and relating to the formation and operation of any corporation, and relating to mergers are conditioned upon their being in conformity with the local laws, and in the event of conflict therewith the local laws shall prevail; ***provided, however***, that this requirement shall not be construed to give the consent of The United Methodist Church to deprivation of its property without due process of law or to the regulation of its affairs by state statute where such regulation violates the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion and separation of church and state or violates the right of the Church to maintain its connectional structure. …

(Emphasis added).

Paragraph 2529.1(c) states that "organizing documents (articles of incorporation, charter, bylaws, or equivalents) of a local church shall reflect its connectional relationship to The United Methodist Church." That section then provides that the organizing documents shall contain the following at a minimum:

> (1) require the local church to be organized and operated in compliance with the *Discipline*;
>
> (2) prohibit the local church from acting in a manner contrary to the purpose of The United Methodist Church, the annual conference, or the *Discipline*;
>
> (3) prohibit the local church from severing its connectional relationship to The United Methodist Church without the annual conference's consent;
>
> (4) require the pastor and the district superintendent to approve, in writing, the adoption of, and changes to, the local church's organizing documents; and
>
> (5) include language consistent with the Internal Revenue Code to protect the local church's tax-exempt status.

Within this church law framework, the Judicial Council agrees with the bishop that, while "¶ 2506.1 makes disciplinary provisions concerning property and church corporations subject to

conformity with applicable local law," the local law does not supplant or allow circumvention of the connectional covenant.

The bishop correctly ruled as well that the annual conference's "*Declaration"* "expressly preserve[d] the corporation's continuing civil existence." The Judicial Council makes no ruling on whether there may be conflicts with civil law that present other issues, but in this particular matter, the annual conference addressed the continuing existence and operation of "Primera Iglesia Methodista, 'La Trinidad,' Incorporated" and the title to the corporation's property consistent with the provisions of the *Discipline* as a whole and ¶ 2506.1 in particular.

Because an *ad interim* closure under ¶ 2549.4(b) vests the local church property in the conference board of trustees, it follows from the foregoing provisions regarding the local church's relationship to the annual conference that, as the bishop ruled, "record title may remain temporarily in the [local church's] corporation pending conveyance or other action directed by the [conference board of trustees]." As the bishop correctly ruled, "[t]his distinction is consistent with *Discipline*, ¶¶ 2504 and 2538, under which property held in a local church's corporate name remains subject to the *Discipline* and is held in trust for the local church and The United Methodist Church."

In regard to the governance of the local church's corporation, for the same connectional and disciplinary reasons, the bishop was also correct in ruling that "[t]he corporation's continuing civil existence does not preserve the prior directors' authority under Church law to control property vested in the [conference board of trustees]. Pursuant to ¶ 2529.1(b)-(d), the bishop correctly ruled that an incorporated local church is bound "to operate in conformity with the *Discipline*, may not act contrary to the purposes of the Annual Conference or denomination, and may not sever its connectional relationship without Annual Conference consent."

As the bishop ruled, closure under the provisions of ¶ 2549.4(b) is not affected by the continued existence of La Trinidad's non-profit corporation formed under civil law or the subsequent vesting of the property in the conference board of trustees and their action in replacing the corporation's leadership. The bishop correctly answered "no" to Question 1.

Question 2:

The bishop determined that Question 2 was moot and hypothetical and made no substantive ruling. In JCD 1514, the Judicial Council reiterated the requirements for a proper request for a decision of law:

> A proper question of law must be submitted in writing in the regular business of a session, must be germane to the regular business, consideration, or discussion of the conference and must state the connection to a specific action taken or to be taken by the conference. *See* JCD 1113. *See also* JCD 799, 1063, 1130, 1131, 1203. A question that does not meet these requirements is moot and hypothetical and should not be decided. *See* JCD 1063.

The bishop correctly ruled that Question 2 assumed that the *Declaration* assigned La Trinidad's assets to entities other than the conference board of trustees. As noted above in the discussion of Question 1, that is not correct. Because the assignment on which Question 2 is premised did not occur, the question is moot and hypothetical. JCD 1113. The bishop's ruling is affirmed. Decisions 799 and 1514.

Question 3:

Question 3 asks whether La Trinidad was "really closed," since it continued to have worship services and was served by an appointed pastor. If not, the question asks whether the actions of the annual conference after the *Declaration* were invalid. This issue was the primary thrust of the various *amicus curiae* briefs.

Physical closure does not happen instantly. As the bishop noted, the *Declaration* closed La Trinidad *ad interim* pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b). Under that paragraph, closure under church law

occurred when the required consents were obtained. As the bishop also ruled, the closure determination under ¶ 2549.4(b) legally terminated La Trinidad's status as a chartered, organized local church. Immediate cessation of every aspect of ministry was neither desired nor required. Nevertheless, the continuation of aspects of ministry in transition following closure does not change the process of ¶ 2549.4(b) or the effect under church law of closure as discussed hereinabove. The bishop correctly ruled that even if ministry continued, La Trinidad did not remain "open as the same chartered local church." The closure process was then finalized by the vote of the members to annual conference. The bishop's decision on Question 3 is affirmed.

Question 4:

Question 4 relates to the civil court action of the annual conference. The Judicial Council does not decide matters of civil law but can decide matters of church law that are impacted by court actions. JCD 1509.

Because the church was closed pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b) and the church property immediately vested in the conference board of trustees, ¶ 2512.4 expressly authorized the trustees to "intervene and take all necessary legal steps to safeguard and protect the interests and rights of the annual conference anywhere and in all matters relating to property and rights to property …" Paragraph 2509.2 provides similar authority "to protect denominational interests."

As discussed above, ¶ 2529.1(b)-(d) requires a local church and its corporation to operate in compliance with the *Discipline* and its connectional covenant. Whether an active organized and chartered church or a closed church in a ministry transition, that local church may not, as the bishop ruled, "act contrary to the purposes of the Annual Conference or denomination." The information in the record regarding the legal proceedings referenced in Question 4 is not inconsistent with the closure provisions of ¶ 2549.4(b); rather they are an effort to protect the integrity of the ¶ 2549.4(b)

process, vested property rights, and the denominational interests that are at the core of that process. The bishop's decision of law on Question 4 is affirmed.

Question 5:

Having affirmed the bishop's decision of law that La Trinidad was closed pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b), the Judicial Council notes that Question 5 re-plows the ground that the church was not actually closed, albeit based on the argument that the membership is being transferred to Nueva Esperanza United Methodist Church "operating at the same location and with the same pastor as La Trinidad." With that alleged premise, the question is framed as whether the annual conference members' vote to approve the closure "constitute[s] an illegal way to take control of La Trinidad's assets."

The bishop's detailed decision of law describes how the steps of ¶ 2549.4(b) were followed, and the Judicial Council has affirmed the bishop's decisions regarding the legality of the process. The short answer is that La Trinidad was closed and the closure decision was approved by the annual conference session, all of which is legal under church law, specifically, ¶ 2549.4(b).

Consistent with her response at the annual conference session that the request for decision of law is a part of our "checks and balances," the bishop carefully explained again in response to Question 5 how the process of ¶ 2549.4(b) was followed and why using that provision was not illegal. The annual conference members agreed, approving the closure. Decision 1490 holds that final step in the closure process under ¶ 2549.4(b) was the fulfillment of the embedded safeguards required by the *Discipline.* The bishop's decision of law on Question 5 is affirmed.

Question 6:

As the bishop pointed out in her decision, Question 6 is conditional, depending upon a finding that the closure of La Trinidad was "invalid for any reason." The Judicial Council has

affirmed the bishop's decisions of law regarding the ¶ 2549.4(b) process that led to the closure of La Trinidad. Thus, the bishop correctly ruled that Question 6 is moot and hypothetical and that no substantive ruling should be made. The Judicial Council affirms that ruling.

DECISION

The decisions of law on the six questions presented to the bishop are affirmed. The California-Pacific Annual Conference correctly followed the requirements of ¶ 2549.4(b) in closing La Trinidad United Methodist Church under exigent circumstances.

November 16, 2026

CONCURRENCE

We concur with our colleagues. Although the decision of law does not raise the constitutionality of ¶ 2549.4(b) as it may be applied, the future use of both that subparagraph and this decision to close churches *ad interim* should be done cautiously with the following concerns in mind. Decisions 1244, 1427.

The *ad interim* procedures of ¶ 2549.4(b) based on exigent circumstances were added to the *Discipline* in 2016. The 2012 *Discipline* allowed for the conference board of trustees to assume control of the real and personal property of the local church. ¶ 2549.3. However, "[i]f circumstances make immediate action necessary," the 2012 *Discipline* provided guidelines for the preservation and disposition of the property. Importantly, the 2012 *Discipline* also limited the trustees to "recommend the disposition of the proceeds in keeping with annual conference policy."

In 2016, the General Conference amended ¶ 2549 to provide for closure of a local church at any time between sessions of annual conference upon consent of the bishop, a majority of the

district superintendents, and the district board of church location and building "in their sole discretion." Those authorities are authorized to declare that "exigent circumstances exist that require immediate protection of the local church's property, for the benefit of the denomination." ¶ 2549.4(b). Upon the declaration, the property "shall immediately vest in the annual conference board of trustees who may hold or dispose of such property in its sole discretion subject to any standing rule of the annual conference." *Id.* Thereafter, "[w]hen it next meets, the annual conference shall decide whether to formally close the local church." *Id.*

The ultimate decision whether to close a church is within the authority of the annual conference.

In JCD 1210, the Judicial Council stated:

> it is within the constitutional authority of the General Conference to develop a plan or plans for the structure and operations of the Church. However, to meet the test of constitutionality, such a plan or plans must not only emerge under the cloak of constitutional authority, but must also avoid intruding into any other constitutional authority.

We view ¶ 2549.4(b)'s sole discretion authority granted to the conference board of trustees to dispose of a local church's property before the annual conference members approve the closure to be an unlawful delegation of authority that circumvents the annual conference's authority. Therefore, unless ¶ 2549.4(b)'s process regarding the disposal of local church property is carried out in the sequence of a closure determination, followed by the annual conference members' approval of the closure, and only then disposal of property in accordance with annual conference policy, we believe the process may be unconstitutional and void as applied.

In JCD 876, the Judicial Council ruled that the "discernment" model adopted by the California-Pacific Annual Conference was null and void because it did not protect the right of the "total conference membership" to make all "final considerations and decisions" on legislative

proposals. We view the decision to close a church under ¶ 2549 to be such a decision. Therefore, what the California-Pacific Annual Conference could not do directly with its "discernment" model cannot be done by the General Conference if the order of disposal of property by the conference board of trustees acts to dispose of a local church's property "in its sole discretion" before the approval of a church closure by the annual conference members.

Consistent with the foregoing, the conference board of trustees is amenable to the annual conference. ¶ 2512.2. And the conference board of trustees is to administer property "under the direction of the annual conference." ¶ 2512.3(a).

Although we have concerns regarding the sequence of the disposal of local church property pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b), we do not analyze at this point the constitutionality of any aspect of ¶ 2549.4(b). The constitutionality, meaning, application, and effect of the remaining provisions of that subparagraph may be the subject of a future decision of law or request for declaratory decision presented, but that is not within the review of the bishop's decision of law in this matter nor is the sequencing issue regarding the disposition of property before the annual conference membership votes on closure pursuant to ¶ 2549.4(b).

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