

# Justice for Reconciler

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## **Timeline of events:**

*Friday, April 1, 2011.* Senior Pastor Kevin Higgs and Pastor Emeritus Lawton Higgs Sr. were absent from the church. We were told only that both of the Higgs were on vacation.

*Sunday, April 3, 2011.* Pastors were still not present. An interim pastor led worship. None of the church leadership had heard from the district superintendent (DS), Ron Schultz, with any explanation as to what was going on.

*Wednesday, April 6, 2011.* Staff –Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) met with Ron Schultz. We were told complaints had been brought against our pastors. We were warned not to talk about anything outside the group under threat of revocation of Kevin’s and Lawton’s credentials.

*Friday, April 8, 2011.* Ron Schultz met with the chair of the finance committee, George Likis. His report of that meeting can be found on our web site.

*April 9-April 26, 2011.* Most of the church had no idea what was happening and the SPRC was not permitted to tell what little they knew. As a result, a sense of distrust and suspicion within the church grew and intensified. Longtime, trusted members of the church were accused of stealing items, showing favoritism, and more. Locks were changed in the building. A sense of mistrust, suspicion, and division was rampant.

*Tuesday, April 26, 2011.* Three weeks into this ordeal, the leadership of the church wrote Ron Schultz to ask for a meeting with him. In his response, he did not address our request for a meeting. He merely ‘assured’ us that the Discipline was being followed.

*Monday, May 9, 2011.* Concerned that the continuing confusion, suspicion and unfounded accusations were taking a serious toll on the church’s sense of community, the church leadership called a meeting of the SPRC to address unity within our congregation. The Discipline clearly lists ‘building unity’ as one of the top tasks of the SPRC. The interim pastor agreed, but then we received an email from Ron Schultz forbidding us from meeting. In the email, Ron said he would meet with the committee “soon” to brief us. To this date, despite repeated requests, Ron Shultz has still not met with this committee nor any other at Church of the Reconciler.

*Thursday, May 26, 2011.* We received another email from Ron Schultz. Without having consulted with us, without meeting with many of the people who wished to be heard, the bishop and cabinet made a decision in this case. Although the complaints against them were found to have no merit, the Higgs would no longer serve at Church of the Reconciler. Lawton, the founding pastor, retired, could no longer be connected to the church “in any capacity.” Among other changes being instituted, we were told that “Church of the Reconciler will become a mission church of the Annual Conference governed by a Board of Directors established by the District.” There had been no Charge Conference or any discussion with any member of the church about the change in status.

*Wednesday, June 1, 2011.* Bishop Willimon was contacted and told that we felt the move to change our status was against the Discipline, and he was informed that if a move were made at

Annual Conference to formalize that decision, we would ask for an Episcopal ruling.

*Thursday-Saturday, June 2-4, 2011.* North Alabama Annual Conference. When the conference ended and no action had been taken to change the status of Church of the Reconciler, we believed that we had successfully stopped the effort to take over our church. However, we were still in a state of grief and shock concerning the removal of our pastors without notice or consultation.

*Wednesday, August 17, 2011.* The interim and new associate pastor met with the SPRC and informed us that the interim pastor would be leaving and the associate pastor would become the only pastor of the church. We had had no consultation with Ron Schultz concerning these changes. We were merely notified of the decision. We were once again notified of plans to replace the lay leadership of the church with an appointed board.

*Sunday, October 5, 2011.* It was announced during worship at Highlands UMC that their associate pastor, Emily Freeman Penfield would be leaving at the end of the year to become senior pastor at Church of the Reconciler. There had been no consultation with Church of the Reconciler about this appointment, and no announcement was made at Reconciler.

*Tuesday, October 11, 2011.* Twenty-nine members and active friends of the church filed a complaint against Bishop Willimon with Bishop Alfred Gwinn of the Southeastern Jurisdiction. We asked for an investigation into the effort to remove the church leadership and the complete lack of consultation and engagement with our members.

*Sunday, October 23, 2011.* Reconciler was finally notified during worship that we would receive Emily Freeman Penfield as our new senior pastor in January.

*November 2011.* We were denied a charge conference. The church council met and unanimously voted against the idea of an appointed board. We were told our meeting was out of order.

*Wednesday, February 8, 2012.* Without any investigation and without talking to a single member of the church or anyone who had signed the letter of complaint, Bishop Gwinn dismissed our complaint against Bishop Willimon.

*April 2012.* A year after this ordeal began, we still had no church board to make decisions or provide leadership in the church. Emily Freeman Penfield was working to put together the board, which had to be approved by the cabinet. None of the people who signed the letter of complaint against the bishop would be considered. In the middle of the month, Emily announced that she was unable to continue as our pastor. Matt Lacey would become our senior pastor. Once again, there was no consultation with the church about these changes. We were merely notified.

*May 1, 2012.* Matt Lacey became the fifth senior pastor of Church of the Reconciler in a 13-month period. The newly appointed board of directors was made public. Of the eight people on the board, only three were members of Church of the Reconciler. Two of those three had been members for less than a year. In an intentionally multicultural, multiracial church, only one of the eight members is African American.

*May 2012.* We continue to serve at Church of the Reconciler despite the disenfranchisement of our leadership. We continue to seek justice, openness and accountability.