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**North Carolina Conference**
The United Methodist Church

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Since late Spring 2022, representatives of the Geer Street community and other Durham neighbors have participated in conversations with leaders of the NC Conference of the United Methodist Church related to Pioneers Church. In June, the NC Conference of the United Methodist Church ceased its partnership with Pioneers. However, conversations continued between UMC leaders and community members regarding next steps regarding the continued presence of the UMC in downtown Durham and the nearby Geer Street community. The following letter is one outcome of those continued conversations and was written as another step along a longer relational journey. Thus, it was not written in the style of a press release. However, since much of the conversation in Durham has been covered by the local press, community members felt it would be meaningful to share the letter in a more open format. Hence, it is offered to the community consistent with this spirit of openness and transparency.

Letter to Durham Geer Street Community

Churches, like many institutions, are slow to change. Many of our systems, policies, procedures, and ways things get done are designed to preserve the status quo, and ultimately to preserve the ways of the institution. The unfortunate result of slow change is that similar patterns of behavior then persist across generations of leaders, and too often people become the collateral. This

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However, one way to disrupt systems and catalyze change is to have forces inside or outside the institution exert enough pressure to move leaders to reflect and consider a different action, a different way of being in the world, and a renegotiation of power. While we wish it did not require this much effort to enact a shift, unfortunately it often takes the focused energy and the courage of others to help us see where we fall short. And we recognize that in many cases, the ones exerting pressure - by highlighting the injustice - are the very people being harmed by the actions and practices of the institution.

On a local level, when it comes to the Geer Street Community and Pioneers Church, we as the NC Conference of the UMC and the Office of New Faith Communities were too slow to recognize the need to make a change. We are sorry we were slow to entirely comprehend the unique nature, values, and make up of this neighborhood. We are sorry that we were not initially attentive to the harm that might be done when a new congregation was started, which was not

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fully affirming of the LGTQIA+ community and inclusive of marriage equality, in a neighborhood which is known to be safe and affirming for LGTQIA+ community members. We are sorry we were not initially attentive to the local businesses that could be harmed by a church-backed business in this space. We acknowledge, in particular, the LGTQIA+ community and allies, and the Black and brown communities who have experienced economic disenfranchisement due to gentrification, and all who consider Geer Street a safe place where people can show up fully themselves. We apologize for harm caused to this community by our action and inaction related to Pioneers Church. We also recognize a major misgiving on our part is that the burden of revealing

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We also recognize a major misgiving on our part is that the burden of revealing our shortcomings fell on you. You did not ask for this church plant, and yet you had to find ways to get our attention so we could see and understand the real and potential harm that could be done to members of the Geer Street community, including those attending Central Park School for Children. We often claim an aspiration to be people who are "quick to listen and slow to speak" or act, but in this case, we acted sooner than we listened. That was our mistake; we are sorry. Though it certainly was not our intention to cause harm to our neighbors in this community of Durham, we are owning that even unintentional harm should be named, acknowledged, and addressed.

In that spirit, we offer our confession and our deepest apologies for the missteps that have brought us to this point. We commit to working alongside our United Methodist congregations in downtown Durham to invest in, repair the harm

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In that spirit, we offer our confession and our deepest apologies for the missteps that have brought us to this point. We commit to working alongside our United Methodist congregations in downtown Durham to invest in, repair the harm caused, and care for the people on Geer Street and its surrounding neighborhoods. Here are some practical things which have been done already or we are committing to for the future:

- 1) The NC Conference of the United Methodist Church ceased our partnership with Pioneers Church in June 2022. This includes stopping all funding, support, and connection with UMC resources.
- 2) We are changing the practices within our Office of New Faith Communities which contributed to the outcomes you experienced. That means we have examined our systems and clarified how we might approach our work first from a place of openness and active learning. We are committed to making sure that "what we know" is then married to *transformative practices*. For example, we are shifting some of our methods of recruiting and identifying church planters, as well as increasing our early engagement with churches and community partners so that we take on a posture of deep listening before taking action.

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- 3) We are investing in local United Methodist congregations already in this community by offering grants and partnerships to support and expand their

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