Statement of Asbury United Methodist Church of Washington, D.C.
On the Proposed Union Station to Georgetown Streetcar Line

The Asbury United Methodist Church has been located on the corner of located 11th & K Streets, NW, since 1836. It is the oldest African-American Church in the city remaining on its original site. The current sanctuary, designed by Clarence Lowell Harding in the English Gothic Revival architectural style, is 100 years old. The church is listed on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites, and it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is a stop on the Civil War to Civil Rights: Downtown Heritage Trail which highlights the church’s significant role in the Underground Railroad and Civil Rights Movement.

In its 178 year history on the corner of 11th and K Streets, it has never been more threatened than it is now with the construction of the Union Station to Georgetown Streetcar Line. As now proposed, the Union Station to Georgetown Streetcar Line poses substantial structural, environmental, programmatic, and aesthetic risks to Asbury and its immediate environment. Among other impacts, it will require the removal of a rare, near 80 year old Dutch Elm tree planted in the front of the church, remove the sidewalk in front of the church, require the removal of the church’s stone marquee, retaining wall, and the outdoor front steps leading to the sanctuary, and confiscate more than twelve feet of the church’s front lawn—the only privately maintained, church-owned, landscaped lawn along K Street in downtown Washington. During the construction phase of the proposed streetcar line, there will likely be structural damage to the leaded stained glass windows of the church, damage to the one hundred year old bell tower, and other structural mishaps. The bell tower itself is a nesting ground for rarely-sighted bird species in Washington, as was recently documented on the front pages of The Washington Post.

What is all the more disconcerting to us as a congregation is that the proposed design and construction of the streetcar line was done without any consultation with Asbury regarding how it may affect a vital and historic Washington institution. Moreover, we observe that a mere one block away at Franklin Square and only two blocks away the strip of land fronting the Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church will be left undisturbed by the streetcar line. The rationale: these are publicly-owned parks. We do not believe that DDOT has given proper deference to Asbury’s designation as a significant historic site, and it has not engaged in the kind of robust consultation and citizen engagement process we should expect of our public agencies when an action it seeks to undertake is so consequential. That neither Franklin Square nor Mount Vernon Square park is encumbered by the streetcar line is as it should be; however, the same rationale for exempting these locations should also apply to Asbury United Methodist Church, which is, and has been for near four decades a site on the National Register of Historic Places.
Asbury has always been proud to be a downtown Washington congregation. Our records do not reflect an instance where the church has raised its voice in opposition to residential or commercial development in its corridor. We believe that we have been good neighbors, and an asset to the downtown community. We support our neighborhood school. We join and develop ministries to oppose prostitution and stop human trafficking. We host the Downtown Cluster of Congregations’ Geriatric Center. We have in the past maintained, and hope to do so in the future, a Child Development Center. We are engaged in a vital ministry to our unhoused neighbors, providing lunch bags, hot meals and toiletries for them. We run a robust food pantry, providing more than one hundred bags of groceries per month for needy Washingtonians. Ours is a worship place where all are welcome.

Yet, all of this missional outreach and service to the community is placed at risk if the streetcar line advances as proposed. Our congregants believe that it will cripple our capacity and space needs, diminish and overshadow our physical presence in downtown, make our church an uninviting place to worship and a difficult venue from which to be married or buried. The known impacts are too severe to countenance, and it is difficult to imagine what some of the unknown impacts will be. We respectfully request DDOT to reconsider its proposal as designed to eliminate its deleterious impacts on one of the oldest and most historic African-American churches in the city of Washington.