

Redeemer Lutheran Church

3462 Midvale Avenue
East Falls, Philadelphia, PA 19129

January 24, 2008

Clare S. Burkat Southeastern PA Synod 506 Haws Avenue Norristown, PA 19401 cburkat@sepa.org	Rev. Lee M. Miller, II St. John Lutheran Church 3101 Tyson Avenue Philadelphia, PA 19149-2098 revmillers@verizon.net	Rev. Raymond A. Miller St. John Lutheran Church P.O. Box 979 Quakertown, PA 18951 raymiller53@hotmail.com	Ms. Tracey Beasley 607 Glen Lane Norristown, PA 19403 twinkset10@juno.com	Mr. J. Lawrence House 250 N. Bethlehem Pike Ambler, PA 19002 lhouse@libertylutheran.org
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Dear Bishop Burkat and Trustees:

Redeemer's council met on Saturday, January 12, 2008 and, among other business, considered two important issues and reached a resolution: (1) the call of Pastor Festo must be concluded, with the concurrence of Synod, without delay; and (2) Redeemer must be fully released from synodical administration, without contingencies.

A. The close of synodical administration

The synodical administration appears to have been put in place on misinformation leading to unjustified conclusions about our church, as Redeemer has demonstrated over the past three months. The continuation of this administration is hindering our ministry efforts on every front, most notably in our efforts to develop enduring and meaningful stewardship, and in our efforts to secure permanent pastoral leadership for our growing church. In addition, it is distracting from our positive ministry efforts which we initiated long before we were ever informed of the synodical administration in October, 2007.

As we have pointed out in the past, the constitutional provisions authorizing the imposition of synodical administration have not been met, and the conditions extant to those provisions do not exist: (1) there is no desire among Redeemer's membership to close; (2) Redeemer's membership is not scattered and its numbers are not diminished but are in fact stronger than they have been in many years; (3) Redeemer is fulfilling all of the functions of a Lutheran parish, as it has been consistently throughout our 100-year history.

To clarify one important point, when Redeemer initiated the Swahili ministry in March, it knew the English-speaking service would receive less attention short term, as Redeemer relied on members who normally attended the English service to provide leadership for the Swahili effort. Reports and attendance did not show up in the parish reports, and the visiting supply pastor who reported this situation to Synod was not fully informed of Redeemer's total ministry.

Also, parish reports are particularly inaccurate since Redeemer has not had a pastor to make such reports in many years. All of this was discussed with Synod representatives both in July and November, 2007. Redeemer has worked overtime, on a repetitive basis, on this and other issues. In return, Synod has shown no interest in this parish other than to place us under synodical administration and then avoid interaction, while this growing, enlightened parish continues to fulfill the very mission Synod claims we have not met.

Pastor Festo Mutashobya, who has been supplying the Swahili service since July, 2007, began supplying the English service as of January 6, 2008. This was under a resolution of council. His first service was spiritually moving and very reassuring to our English-speaking members who left the sanctuary that Sunday with a visibly renewed spirit. Our congregation can now see that the sacrifices the English-speaking members made short term, have resulted in a stronger, more spiritually unified congregation.

Respectfully, if Synod intends to hold Redeemer under synodical administration, it must have good cause under its constitution to do so. If circumstances do not warrant such an imposition, as here, the administration must immediately be lifted. Both under our constitution as an operating Lutheran parish, and Synod's constitution governing its operations in the Southeastern Synod, there is mutuality of obligation, where each of us must respect and oblige the responsibilities and mission of the other.

Without mutual obligation, the expectations and conduct of Redeemer and Synod would be erratic and unpredictable, leading to unwarranted decisions and a breakdown of our Christ-centered missions and the worshipping body — quite the opposite of what these constitutions were designed to protect. In fact, we believe Redeemer Lutheran Church presents as a model church under Synod's constitution and all points considered, synodical administration simply is not justified.

For the above reasons, and for the additional reasons relating to the need to call Pastor Festo, Redeemer insists that the synodical administration be immediately lifted without contingencies.

B. Completion of the call of Pastor Festo Mutashobya

Redeemer's congregational council approached the Bishop on November 1, 2007 with a resolution to call Pastor Mutashobya. Its desire to do so is even stronger today, as more people have had the opportunity to come to know and worship with him. Redeemer has had several spiritually significant events under his leadership including the Christmas concert, prayer services and a weekly Bible study. Pastor Festo is sensitive to his position as "supply pastor" but is restrained from full ministry only by the lack of the Bishop's endorsement.

The failure of Synod to address Redeemer's resolution on Pastor Festo in any way in the past three months is bewildering, as is the almost nonexistent response to Redeemer's numerous communications with the Bishop's office over the past two years. We have fully complied with every request of the Bishop in November and, in fact, Redeemer came to the November 1, 2007 meeting with most of the information already in place before it was requested. Redeemer has a spiritually driven and capable leadership team in place, which includes the volunteer services of a certified public accountant.

In spite of all of this, Redeemer has been without a pastor for more than a year. For the *past ten years*, Redeemer has been without a pastor most of the time, its ministry sustaining only from the limited services of various supply pastors who simply were not equipped to expand our ministry. We have been in continual communication with the Bishop's office for most of the past ten years, with little attention paid to this situation. Redeemer needs a pastor now.

Redeemer has seen no action from the trustees or the Bishop's office since our November 1, 2007 meeting. That meeting was our one and only meeting with the bishop in 2007. During this time, we made regular attempts to communicate with the Dean and Synod representatives, with little response. Redeemer's own ministry efforts, guided by God's hand, have led us to seek pastoral leadership that is compatible with the current situation and shows great promise. Hence, our resolution to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya.

Synod has had ample opportunity to evaluate and approve Redeemer's resolution to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya. Redeemer's council is committed to continue to provide leadership as it has been elected to do by the congregation, and as it has done without interruption in spite of the imposition of synodical administration.

As of January 1, 2008, Redeemer considers Pastor Mutashobya its pastor. He is qualified, and a respected member of the congregation. He has attended council meetings for the past six months, and is fully aware of Redeemer's situation. He was part of the process for developing Redeemer's ministry plan (again, no response from Synod on this plan). He has accepted our proposed compensation terms and is excited that he can work both within Redeemer and in our larger community to advance and build our congregation and ministry.

Most impressive in the past several months has been the desire of both services to interact in fellowship and worship. Redeemer presents with one congregation, despite its diversity. We are planning united worship for the upcoming Lent and Easter seasons, as proposed by the worshipers at the Swahili service. It has been a joy to watch people grow in Christian fellowship at a self-designed pace. Pastor Mutashobya's spiritual leadership has been pivotal in providing a strong foundation upon which to continue to build our parish and to thrive as a unique, and united, parish community.

Both Redeemer and Synod must be responsible to the Christ-centered mission of fulfilling Redeemer's mission, growing its congregation and evangelizing both within its congregation and in the larger community. Redeemer is dedicated to moving forward with its specific plans, as outlined above and in its ministry plan. This must begin with concurrence and support from Synod for immediate and unconditional release from the synodical administration, and the consummation of the call of Pastor Festo Mutashobya.

Yours in Christ,

Redeemer Lutheran Church
Congregational Council
Stanley Meena, President
Judith Gotwald, Vice President
Selina Mbowe
Abigail Bomani
Freda Gowling
Kevin Siropaides
Nathaniel Leach
Prisca Mutashobya
Primus Muganyizi
Emmanuel Bandawe
Dr. Festo Mutashobya, Congregation Member and Supply Pastor

cc: Rev. Patricia Davenport
Southeastern PA Synod
506 Haws Avenue
Norristown, PA 19401
pdavenport@sepa.org

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J. STEPHEN WOODSIDE
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February 19, 2008

TELEFAX to 610-278-7346 and U.S. MAIL

Office of the Secretary
Synod Assembly - Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
506 Haws Avenue
Norristown, PA 19401

Re: Redeemer Lutheran Church - East Falls

Dear Secretary:

I represent Redeemer Lutheran Church ("Redeemer") of East Falls, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Consistent with all applicable provisions of Southeastern Synod's constitution and the rules of order of Synod Assembly (if any) governing the review and appeal of decisions of the Bishop and/or Synod-appointed Trustees within this Synod, Redeemer Lutheran Church hereby serves its notice of appeal and demand for review of the decisions and positions of Claire S. Burkat, Bishop, set forth in her letter to Redeemer's council dated February 12, 2008 and the Bishop's letter to Redeemer's congregation dated February 12, 2008.

All claims and positions are reserved. None are waived.

Very truly yours,

/s/ J. Stephen Woodside

J. Stephen Woodside

/rr

cc: Redeemer Lutheran Church
Claire S. Burkat, Bishop
The Rev. Lee M. Miller, III
The Rev. Raymond A. Miller
Ms. Tracy Beasley
Mr. J. Lawrence House

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February 22, 2008

TELEFAX and U.S. MAIL and email

Claire S. Burkat, Bishop
Office of the Bishop
SOUTHEASTERN PENNA SYNOD
506 Haws Avenue
Norristown, PA 19401

Re: Redeemer Lutheran Church

Dear Bishop Burkat:

As you are aware, I represent Redeemer Lutheran Church, Philadelphia (East Falls) ("Redeemer"). Your letters dated February 12, 2008 to Redeemer council members and the congregation, respectively, have been referred to me for response.

I must inform you that the congregational council and members of Redeemer have no intention of attending any meeting scheduled by Southeastern Synod to discuss ending its ministry or closing Redeemer. Accordingly, Redeemer's council and members will not be in attendance at the meeting you have set for Sunday, February 24, 2008 at 3:00 p.m.

Synod's reasons for closing Redeemer are invalid. The imposition of "involuntary synodical administration" upon Redeemer has always been unwarranted and without support in synod's own constitution, as Redeemer never requested synodical administration nor concurred in the action, and its condition and strength of its ministries and membership demand a contrary conclusion.

Redeemer has always carried out its stated mission and fulfilled its purpose, and is doing so today, despite over *eight months* of crippling non-action by synod and its Trustees towards Redeemer, broken promises, erroneous conclusions about its membership and ministries, and an inexplicable and outright refusal to acknowledge Redeemer's resolution to call Festo Mutashobya into full time pastoral ministry at Redeemer or propose other pastoral candidates.

At this point, Redeemer's council and members are certainly willing and able to find a prompt and satisfactory resolution to synod's unjustified demands to bring an end to Redeemer's vibrant and growing ministry. However, as so clearly stated in Redeemer's letters of December 26, 2007 and January 24, 2008, the direction and movement must be to immediately end this unwarranted synodical administration, as it is crippling and unjustified, and to seriously consider the call of Festo Mutashobya into full time ministry at Redeemer, as well as other relevant action deemed in the best interests of Redeemer, under the applicable constitutions.

Very truly yours,

/s/ J. Stephen Woodside

J. Stephen Woodside

/rr

cc: Redeemer Lutheran Church
The Rev. Lee M. Miller, II
The Rev. Raymond A. Miller
Ms. Tracey Beasley
Mr. J. Lawrence House
Rev. Patricia Davenport

Redeemer Lutheran Church

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March 20, 2008

FEDERAL EXPRESS—FOR YOUR IMMEDIATE ATTENTION

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631

Re: Redeemer Lutheran Church, East Falls, Philadelphia

Dear Bishop Hanson:

I am writing on behalf of Redeemer Lutheran Church's congregational council and the congregation. I am the president of council, and a ten-year member (with my family) of Redeemer. Redeemer is a viable, active urban Lutheran congregation in East Falls, Philadelphia. We are presently faced with a very serious situation involving our nearly 100-year relationship with the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod and presiding Bishop Clare Burkat, which is threatening the very existence of our church.

On February 12, 2008, Bishop Burkat notified Redeemer's council that Redeemer would be closed, that council was prohibited from acting, and Redeemer was to turn over to synod all bank and financial records and accounts, keys to the church property, and to cooperate with the synodical "Trustees" to wind down all church affairs. On the same date, the Bishop circulated a letter to all congregants, conveying the same demands that synod would take charge and possession of all Redeemer's property and assets, and that Redeemer would close.

The matter of closure came to a full head when on Sunday, February 24, 2008, the bishop, Pastor Davenport, the four synod trustees, several others, and the synod's legal council arrived at Redeemer with a locksmith, to gain entry and attempt to take possession and control of our church building and property. Access was denied, and with the intervention of our legal council, the bishop and synod representatives left the premises. Suit was filed later that week.

This egregious and unwarranted action towards our active, vibrant parish is so violative of our [church] constitutional rights and privileges as a faithful Lutheran congregation and ministry, that we were forced to retain legal counsel and file a lawsuit in the Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas. A copy of the complaint is attached as part of this petition, not to emphasize the legal issues against the synod, but rather as important background to this unacceptable action by synod (particularly the bishop) against our faithful parish.

Under the present circumstances, **both Redeemer's council and congregation have resolved not to close, and to oppose synod's continuing unwarranted action.** Synod is well aware of our positions, particularly over the past six months, as we have sought to satisfy every demand of synod and bring an end to the synodical administration, finalize a call of a highly qualified Lutheran pastor supplying to Redeemer over the past year, and grow our church ministry and ecumenical programs in faithful respect and outreach as a model Lutheran ELCA member-church.

In response, synod and the bishop have refused to honor the respective constitutions, have purposefully acted to thwart our vibrant ministry and cripple our church by refusing to complete or even acknowledge the call of Pastor Festo Mutashobya. The four synod Trustees took no action to help or even visit Redeemer, and the bishop refused to honor any of the commitments made in the Fall of 2007 when she met with our council to discuss our status.

Rumor mixed with truth unfortunately surrounds the current situation, but we have learned that synod has long desired that our church fail which is the clear message carried by our current Bishop Burkat and synod. Overall, synod and the bishop have acted with the singular, opprobrious goal of scattering our council and congregants of faithful believers, and seizing our assets and buildings which synod and the bishop view as far more valuable than our people or the faithful ministry God has ordained us to execute.

Given the above, the purpose of this letter is to request that Redeemer Lutheran Church be immediately permitted to **sever all ties and immediately withdraw from the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. We have no desire to leave the ELCA**, but request that ELCA assign Redeemer to another parent-synod spiritually and constitutionally willing to provide oversight and guidance to our vibrant and growing ministry. One plan is that ELCA will designate a non-geographical multi-cultural synod or even a Kiswahili Synod, similar to the current Slovak Zion non-geographic synod, for Redeemer to participate in. We are prayerfully asking that other options, developed around the withdrawal from Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, be considered for Redeemer.

In support of our requests, we present the following information:

A. Status of Redeemer's ministry

Redeemer currently has 72 active members, and 2 infants awaiting baptism. Of these, approximately 15 are associate members. Redeemer will hold an estimated 106 services this calendar year. Bible study groups began weekly last fall (2007), and are growing in attendance. We have 20 members involved in choir cantatas, and 8 in the children's choir. Monthly special prayer meetings are held and additional prayer meetings are often called as needed. Redeemer has five active committees, all constitutionally authorized (property, worship, finance, fellowship, and education). Council is duly appointed and/or elected and meets monthly, conducting all church business in accordance with our governing documents. Church officers are duly appointed and/or elected, and with the exception of a Financial Secretary in 2007.

Broken down by category, Redeemer presents the following information:

- 1. Mission fulfillment.** Redeemer assisted the neighboring congregation of Epiphany Lutheran (Roxborough, Philadelphia) whose building was condemned and whose membership chose to close. For 14 months, Redeemer desired to have the two congregations and councils merge, however Epiphany voted against this and turned all assets over to synod. The outcome was a rough spot for us, but overall Redeemer recovered.

Redeemer makes weekly visits to a member's relative in prison. We have helped with Thrivent Habitat for Humanity project. We have fostered the Swahili Ministry beginning with the seven Swahili members who have belonged to Redeemer for more than eight years. Since then, 52 members have joined as the result of this ministry. Four families from our church attend Lutheran Church Camp and continue to be core to this camp's success. Several more families are interested in attending this year.

Participation in all ecumenical programs is strong and united, with both English and Swahili ministries participating and worshiping faithfully in devotion of time, service, and skills and ideas, to God's glory. In fact, Redeemer has experienced the best worship attendance of all churches at recent shared community Lenten series. We provide our adjacent property at below-market rent to a Lutheran-based community services group, with full occupancy under a long-term lease. Redeemer has long opened its church sanctuary to other social based groups (such as AA) at nominal or no fee.

- 2. Innovations.** Redeemer has developed a liturgical format which uses both English and Swahili languages. At Christmas celebration services, we adapted a published Cantata for our mixed choral styles. At Easter, we wrote and produced our own Cantata which was performed at the East Falls Community Service and very well received. We have regular performances of original church music. We successfully unified new commu-

nities into active church life. There are visitors almost every week. Our location is a prime cultural corner in a neighborhood targeted (and experiencing) redevelopment and we are now looking to involve ourselves in community affairs. We are particularly conscious of racial unrest at the public school directly across the street from us and we feel our long-term relationship with this school could have positive effect. Leadership and lay ministry abounds in this congregation. All members are able and willing to fill in and participate in all segments of church ministry.

- 3. Long-term planning.** On November 1, 2007 Redeemer presented a plan to the Bishop, the Trustees, and the synod, for funding — all from our own resources — a full time pastoral ministry. The Plan is attached to this letter. Redeemer informed synod as early as July, 2007 that the plan existed. The plan is comprehensive and well-developed, and includes ideas and a commitment to assist all urban ministries, not just Redeemer. In conjunction with its presentation, and in anticipation of his call, we reached a tentative agreement for Pastor Festo Mutashobya's terms and compensation. Sadly, our Plan for Ministry fell on deaf ears, and synod refused to respond to our council resolution for his pastoral call.
- 4. Cash assets.** Redeemer over its 100-year history has always existed and thrived on its own cash and investments, and stewardship commitment. Since synod intervened with a synodical administration 10 years ago (which took 3 years to recover from) and under the current "involuntary" administration which has served no purpose other than to set up closure, Redeemer's stewardship has suffered and some cash has depleted. Redeemer owns buildings and property worth approximately \$1.5 million. Redeemer has no debt, its obligations are current, and has cash in the bank of approximately \$50,000. Stewardship is expected to increase significantly this year, notwithstanding *no pastor* in the pulpit and the strain of litigation.
- 5. Plans and goals for the year.** Redeemer, in spite of the synodical administration and the refusal of synod to execute the call of Pastor Festo (or any other pastor), plans to do the following this year:
 - a. Provide for consistent pastoral services to members and neighborhood for the first time in 10 years;
 - b. Renovation of a 50-year-old kitchen to be completed by the summer with contractor pledging profits to building an orphanage in Tanzania. Project to be funded entirely by special fund-raising efforts already planned;
 - c. Grow individual leadership skills for every member (as we do each year);
 - d. Develop resources for multi-cultural worship to share with other multi-cultural congregations. Three materials are ready for publication, designed for small churches to be used with very little professional leadership and musicianship;
 - e. Increase membership by 10%, which is well along to accomplishment;
 - f. Begin stewardship drive, which has been hindered unnecessarily by the uncertainty surrounding the current harmful effects of synod's action towards us;
 - g. Continue to foster multi-cultural ministry efforts;
 - h. Through a community educational program, offer Swahili language lessons and offer participants a place to practice using the language by inviting them to events at our church. If successful, replicate the program in Spanish.
- 6. Final statistics.** The following is a summary of important statistics demonstrating synod's level of participation in shepherding our church during the period of "involuntary synodical administration":
 - a. Number of times the bishop and "trustees" worshiped or attended a Redeemer service or event: **0**;
 - b. Number of times the bishop, "trustees" or the dean responded to our attempts to communicate from the period December 2006 to February 2008: **0**;
 - c. Number of times "trustees" met with Redeemer to verify their "findings" before announcing the bishop's decision to close our church: **0**.

B. Synodical administration and attempted closure of Redeemer is unwarranted

Synod's constitution does not provide for any condition of "involuntary synodical administration". Therefore, any decision by the bishop that such "administration" is necessary or permitted, no matter what the facts, is utterly unwarranted. Synod's constitution (S13.25) does provide synod may temporarily assume administration of a congregation upon its request or with its concurrence, but Redeemer never requested, or agreed or concurred, in such temporary administration and all points indicate synod never invoked this provision. Moreover, synod never invoked any provision allowing for discipline of Redeemer or its congregation under any constitution, and therefore, synod has no basis to take such opprobrious, harmful action towards Redeemer on the basis of discipline.

Second, Redeemer does not fit the criteria for unilateral action by the synod under S13.24, in what amounts to a wholesale stripping of Redeemer's ministry and assets.¹ Redeemer has no desire, and has not voted, to close and the congregants would never agree that it is no longer possible for Redeemer to function as a congregation. There is absolutely no support for synod's position that the congregation has become so scattered or so diminished in numbers as to make it impractical for the congregation to fulfill its purpose as a Lutheran ministry or church. There is no waste or deterioration of Redeemer's property and no amount of conjecture would support a decision or opinion of synod council that waste or deterioration of property is occurring.

Accordingly, it is clear that synod, and this bishop, have intentionally usurped the authority in the constitution governing when synod, or the bishop, is authorized to act, and factually nothing about the current state of Redeemer, or its congregation or council, remotely supports the drastic action of synod to close Redeemer and seize its valuable property and assets.

C. The church constitutions and ministries of Redeemer and Synod, and ELCA, must not be drawn along racial divides.

Bishop Burkat, and the entire synod, view our current ministry at Redeemer with plain antagonism, along racial divides that is invidious both to the spirit of our Christian ministries and our lawful rights as citizens to worship in a Lutheran church. All who worship and qualify have the right to join in membership, and lead and govern in duly appointed roles, in accordance with the spirit and requirements of the constitutions that synod and the bishop are imbibed to honor and protect.

No evaluation of our ministries, our congregational worship or ecumenical programs or outreach has been made or attempted by synod or the bishop, particularly over the past nine months. The bishop and synod have only acted to critique our makeup and ignore the unity of our congregants, and have intentionally refused to help or even recognize the growing blend of historical and emerging ministries and believers at Redeemer. All points indicate the bishop relied only on old or incomplete data to reach false conclusions about Redeemer, and intentionally ignored our pleas for a fair review. While the bishop searched for a way to close our church, our church grew in ministry, size, programming and outreach.

When Redeemer was finally informed of the decision of "involuntary synodical administration" status in October, 2007, (we learned, more than four months after it was invoked) Redeemer's council met with the bishop and the trustees and presented statistics along with our final five-year Plan for Ministry. Our council made an excellent presentation the evening of November 1, 2007 at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Mount Airy, Philadelphia. At that meeting, the bishop revealed a prejudice and attitude in her choice of language and intent to separate our congregation along racial divides, referring to us as "white Redeemer" and "black Redeemer", further referring to our membership list along the lines of color and time in membership.

In reviewing our membership list that evening, the bishop said "an awful lot of these names look African to me". We were aghast, but did not challenge her. Our members are significantly uncomfortable with such designations, which are patently inappropriate and not supported by any constitutional provisions for church membership or governance, and clearly unlawful. Our congregational makeup is multiracial, and multi-cultural, as are many local churches and congregations (Lutheran included) similarly situated in an urban setting.

It follows, even an attempt to label Redeemer along a cultural divide of “English” and “Swahili”, as the bishop has done in numerous recent correspondence, reveals the same predisposed attitude that because our church does not “look” like the church the bishop wants on our street corner, she can reinvent the constitution, call it synod “opinion”, close the church and seize its property and assets.

D. The need for full and immediate withdrawal from Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod

Viewing the facts of Redeemer’s vibrant and active ministry status as a whole, the inexplicable conduct of the bishop and synod to attempt to close Redeemer, rather than to understand and assist Redeemer in its vibrant ministry (as is constitutionally required), indicates our relationship as a Lutheran congregation under the jurisdiction of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod is irretrievably and permanently broken.

The only remedy at this point is to grant Redeemer an unconditional and immediate withdrawal from the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, and a reassignment (or other comparable designation) to a new or alternate synod within ELCA, all for the preservation and good benefit of our faithful Lutheran congregation of believers.

Once you have had the opportunity to review and evaluate our requests in this letter, it would be greatly appreciated if you could contact our church council, or me (267-259-3665), directly with your decision. Time is of the essence on our request.

Thank you for your kind courtesy and consideration.

Yours in Christ:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stanley Meena', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stanley Meena
President, Redeemer Council

Enclosures

cc: Redeemer Lutheran Church

¹ Synod’s constitution provides that if any congregation has disbanded, or if the members of a congregation agree that it is no longer possible for it to function as such, or it is the opinion of Synod Council that the membership of the congregation has become so scattered or so diminished in numbers as to make it impractical for such congregation to fulfill the purposes for which it was organized or that it is necessary to protect the congregation’s property from waste or deterioration, Synod Council, itself or through trustees appointed by it, may take charge and control of the property of the congregation to hold, manage and convey it on behalf of Synod. (S13.24).

Redeemer Lutheran Church

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March 29, 2008

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631

“What is God doing with and among us?”

Dear Bishop Hanson,

At Redeemer Lutheran Church in East Falls, Philadelphia, we read your Lenten message, which was forwarded to us by a pastor. It inspired us. “What is God doing with and among us?” you asked us to ask ourselves.

Sometimes God’s ways among us are a bit of a mystery. We aspire but struggle to do mission in the ways we were taught in Sunday School and we cannot see ready results. We hear inexplicable, discouraging words from synodical leadership. “Your church must be allowed to die.” “There are no pastors for you.” “It is impossible for you to fulfill your mission.” Has our Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod not heard your message? Perhaps the statement of synod which most resonates in our minds is “Ministry in East Falls is not good use of the Lord’s money.” We were told this in those very words ten years ago and it still reflects synod’s attitudes towards our vibrant church: our assets are worth more than our faithful congregants.

But today, at Redeemer, we can see God working with us and among us. Perhaps that is why our faithful, growing congregation is so alive and so joyful in ministry. God is truly with us and working among us.

Against all predictions of synod leadership, in spite of a decade of very little pastoral leadership guiding our church congregants and council, and even in the face of synod leadership declaring us closed, our church continues to grow. We are growing not only in numbers but in unity and mission.

In the face of our previous bishop’s attempt to close our church in 1998, we received new members. This family only recently shared with us that 10 years ago, a synod representative visited them and attempted to dissuade them from joining our church. They chose to join Redeemer anyway, and ten years later they have become a cornerstone of our congregation. This is surely God’s work among us.

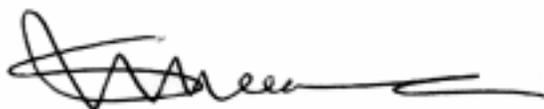
Significant outreach efforts over the last few years centered on our congregants’ friendships and cultural connections. Evangelism at Redeemer is alive. Our church has been transformed. This is surely God’s work with us.

Today, synod’s impression of our congregation is locked in the prejudices of the past. They cannot see and will not accept the reality that we are a growing, vibrant church with a blended English and Swahili ministry, with sufficient assets, talents and resources to support our Lutheran mission in our community.

We wrote to you on Holy Thursday about our situation and hope that you have had sufficient time to review the facts surrounding our important request. We want to continue to grow, thrive, worship and serve the Lord. The Lord has been abundant towards us as we continue to reach out as a faithful church of evangelism and praise in the Lutheran tradition.

We have all the resources to minister and grow, except synod support for our ministry and its approval of our pastoral call to Pastor Festo Mutashobya. We hope that you have had time to ponder our detailed request to somehow be freed from the synod which is restraining us from our mission. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours in Christ,
Redeemer Church Council
Stanley Meena, President



Redeemer Lutheran Church

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April 22, 2008

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631

Re: Redeemer Lutheran Church (East Falls, Philadelphia)

Dear Bishop Hanson,

On Sunday, April 6, a group of ten from Redeemer Lutheran Church attended a speech by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Archbishop Tutu spoke of his lifelong pursuit of peace under difficult circumstances. In answer to an audience member's question about the Truth and Reconciliation process and its applicability to situations faced in the United States, Archbishop Tutu expressed his conviction that peace was possible and that thoughtful steps of the Truth and Reconciliation process must be doggedly pursued in order to rectify any oppressive situation.

At Redeemer Lutheran Church in East Falls, Philadelphia, we are sadly engaged in such a conflict with our synodical leadership, a situation we did not seek, do not desire, but know that it is within our mission as a congregation to resist. We want resolution so that we can continue the mission to which we are called — to be witnesses to our faith in our community. This is urgently needed in urban communities and cannot be fulfilled by the current misguided trend to provide inadequate support to urban congregations, followed by forcible attempts to close churches and seize property and savings. We routinely see urban church assets sold and lost to the purposes of mission which faithful members of our communities have sacrificed to provide. This is an ongoing tragedy.

We have been writing to you about our urgent situation. We received your recent answer to our first communication referencing the constitution as the appropriate avenue for redress of our grievances. Please know that we have been pursuing this route from the very beginning. We informed Bishop Burkat and the Secretary of Synod in writing of our intent to appeal in mid-February, just days after the Bishop's surprise letter to the congregation. Bishop Burkat's failed attempt to forcibly seize our property on February 24 followed this notice. Since then we have made two written requests for guidelines to the appeal process. With our Annual Synod Assembly now less than two weeks away we have yet to receive any response.

We are not sure any actual guidelines exist and have concerns that any rules will be contrived to favor the Bishop's desired outcome which we would hope is not shared by Synod Assembly. Nevertheless, we always have been willing to take the necessary steps. Synod's continued pattern of inattention to the situation they created is unjustifiable. It appears that our appeal will have to wait until 2009 as synod's failure to provide answers to our questions on procedure allows us inadequate preparation time. We certainly do not look forward to a year of continuing conflict. We have a peaceful proposal.

We would like very much to use this coming year, with the help of Pastor Festo (if he is still willing) to work toward the goals we have clearly outlined to both you and synod leadership and that synod will have evidence that our continued ministry is of value. Perhaps, working together for this year can bring synod and Redeemer to a peaceful resolution which will foster mission and healing. There is nothing to lose in sanctioning this approach to resolving this conflict. A great deal of good may be gained, and the good work of joint ministry of Redeemer and Synod for our Lord sustained and enhanced. We will contact Bishop Burkat and request that she personally work with us in this goal. If we can forge an atmosphere that allows us to be part of the solution, we can build a wonderful model urban ministry here. We cannot imagine any church leadership which is truly interested in promoting evangelism opposing such a sensible, measured path toward peace.

We have long tried to avoid an adversarial situation and in spite of the necessary protective action of litigation, we have only sought the assistance of Synod and the Bishop exactly as the constitutions provide. We respectfully approached our new bishop in December 2006 with our desire to call a minister. We heard nothing for nearly a year, despite regular attempts to communicate with synod and the dean. All letters and phone calls went unanswered. Over the course of this year we found a pastor we liked and who was willing to accept our terms to work with us. We were excited and looked again to synod for nothing but their approval of our call. For four months we received no response to our October resolution, which eight of our ten-member council personally placed in the bishop's hands on November 1, 2007. Again, inquiries went unanswered. Instead, Bishop Burkat wrote to the entire congregation in February, declaring us closed with no consultation or forewarning to our leaders.

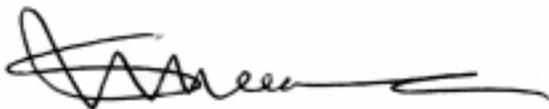
There are times when it is right to oppose wrongful actions and this is one of those times. It is costly to our congregation in so many ways, but we feel that it would be terribly wrong to allow these actions to succeed without opposition when there are viable, untried alternatives. We will doggedly pursue every avenue to peaceful resolution and hope we can avoid the costly strain of litigation. It is time for Truth and Reconciliation. We have a year to make this happen. We hope you might as shepherd of shepherds personally encourage Bishop Burkat to put aside power tactics which do nothing to foster ministry, to be receptive to our ideas, and to work with us in an atmosphere of mutual respect for our common missions.

In addition, as SEPA's Annual Synod Assembly approaches, we are anxious to know the national church's vision for congregations faced with our circumstances. We know that we are not alone. We have already seen two congregations within two miles of us close with sizable neighborhood church assets turned over to the synod, which then puts nothing back into these neighborhoods.

At Redeemer, we have a knowledgeable and talented membership who is willing to help chart a course to reverse this trend in the urban church. We feel strongly that a nongeographical synod which can focus on the needs of congregations such as ours is needed, so that the geographical synods can remain attentive to the needs of all congregations and can no longer go unchallenged in mining smaller congregations for their physical assets. We realize that there are practicalities to such an idea, but we think that there might be support for such an effort. We know that many of our neighboring congregations feel similar strains and are watching us closely. Let us be the first to commit to the idea with an annual pledge to a new synodical entity. This would be in addition to the pledge our congregation approved at our annual meeting last February to set up a seminary training fund to promote the education of pastors for urban congregations. At Redeemer we are thinking beyond our own needs.

Thank you for what help you can offer. We will continue to keep you apprised.

Respectfully, in Christ,
Redeemer Congregation Council

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. W. ...", written over a horizontal line.

Redeemer Lutheran Church

3462 Midvale Avenue
East Falls, Philadelphia, PA 19129
(215) 438-6692
www.redeemereastfalls.com or www.redeemereastfalls.org

May 9, 2008

To: All Members of Synod Council, SEPA Synod

From: Stanley Meena, President, Congregation Council, Redeemer Lutheran Church, East Falls, Philadelphia

Re: Report of Synod Council at May 3 Synod Assembly

Dear Synod Council membership:

Two members of our Redeemer Lutheran Church, East Falls, Philadelphia, were present as representatives at the May 2 and 3, 2008 Synod Assembly and heard for the first time the report of the Synod Trustees concerning our congregation. Redeemer formally protests this report. It is inaccurate and incomplete, and appears to be based on outdated and, in some cases, false information concerning the operation and condition of our church. I personally read a statement concerning the status of our appeal to the Synod Assembly of certain decisions of Bishop Burkat in February, 2008, which was made aware to the Office of the Bishop *in advance* of the Assembly conference.

Unfortunately, the Assembly leadership and the Synod Trustees persisted at the Assembly and read this report to the entire Assembly, knowing in advance Redeemer's position concerning the important matter of our appeal. The reading of this report placed Redeemer in a position of unfair surprise, forcing us to listen to it without being able to respond in front of the *entire Assembly*. Without a doubt, immeasurable damage has been done to our church and congregation by the reading of this report. Correction needs to be made.

SIGNIFICANT INACCURATE STATEMENTS IN THE REPORT

While not exhaustive, there are many inaccurate statements in the Trustees Report that must be corrected to reflect the true status of our vibrant and important ministry, the most notable of which are:

1. Contrary to the report's statement that "Membership at the conclusion of 2007 was reported as 13," on November 1, 2007, eight of our ten-member council presented our complete membership list to the Bishop. The list included more than 70 congregant's names, all appropriately rostered under our constitution. On November 22, we presented addresses for our members at the Bishop's request. Why the Trustees or the Bishop continue to refuse to acknowledge our members, despite a mandate that they do so, is inexplicable.
2. The report says "A Swahili language community began over the last 2 years at Redeemer. While the worship has often been spirit filled with about 20 participants, this ministry has not worked cooperatively with the office of the Mission director of the SEPA Synod."

This is completely inaccurate information. The fact is, our ministry, which is older than two years, has been featured at Synod Assembly. We are listed in the ELCA Yearbook as the only Swahili language worship ministry represented in this document. Our ministry was started as an extension of our existing ministry not as a "mission," and even if we were viewed as a mission by the Bishop, we received no assistance or inquiry by the Bishop or Synod leadership about our ministry programs. Seven of our African membership have been members for more than eight years with several holding leadership positions in the congregation. We reported our successes to Rev. Bubba by letter in June 2007. Synod was well aware of our growing ministries, yet we received no response. Our member and temporary pastor, the Rev. Festo Mutashobya, who has been developing both the Swahili and English ministries at Redeemer since June 2007, also attempted to communicate with Synod's director of missions. None of his letters or phone calls was acknowledged or returned.

3. The report states derogatory information regarding the February 24, 2008, congregational meeting proposed by the Bishop: “Two leaders instructed the congregation not to attend and greeted the Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop, and Trustees by threatening to have them arrested for trespassing.”

The fact is, this meeting was announced by letter from the Bishop to our congregation without consultation of our leadership. As expressed in her letter, the sole purpose of the Bishop’s intended meeting was to *close our church*, utilizing her claim of “temporary synodical administration,” which Redeemer never agreed to or concurred in, to do so. More to the point, our Congregational Annual Meeting had already been properly noticed for that day with our plans to meet in the morning and the Bishop’s plan for a meeting at 3 p.m. It was the decision of the entire 10-member council to proceed with our Annual Meeting as planned. In fact, five additional members of the congregation and a supply pastor sat in on the meeting when this decision was made. We notified the Bishop’s office immediately of our plans. That morning, at our Annual Meeting, it was decided to have two members return that afternoon in the event the Bishop showed up. The congregation had *no intention* of allowing the Bishop to close our church.

There was never a threat to arrest anyone. When pressed to open our doors for the Bishop’s party of about nine people, we insisted that it was the decision of the congregation not to meet that day, reminding them that they had received notice of this, which they acknowledged. The Bishop was on location only to close our church, as her group included a locksmith and the Synod’s attorney (who was in telephone contact with our attorney). When we saw what was happening, we did state, “If you try to enter our property without our permission, we are prepared to call the police.” One of the trustees exclaimed, “You want the Bishop to be arrested?” We responded, “We do not want anyone to be arrested; we want you to leave.” This conflict was unnecessary and unfair to Redeemer, and it was diffused peacefully. There is no mention of this in the Trustees Report read to Synod Assembly. Unfortunately, all of this activity left us with no choice but to file the present lawsuit against the Synod.

4. This report states: “Throughout the last year the trustees have met with the leadership of Redeemer, current and former members of the congregation, former professional staff, and congregational staff. Members of the trustees have worshiped at Redeemer and have made themselves available for communication throughout the process.”

This statement is simply not true. The trustees never showed any interest in Redeemer and took no action to oversee or run our church operations or ministries. Three of the four trustees met with Redeemer leadership *only once* during this year as trustees and otherwise had no involvement with Redeemer. One trustee was not present at this important meeting. The trustees offered no assistance to Redeemer. This single meeting was on November 1, 2007. Although Synod Council claims it voted to place our congregation under “involuntary synodical administration” in early June 2007, the congregation was not informed of their action until the following fall.

At the beginning, when the four trustees met with three of our leaders in mid-July 2007, they did not identify themselves as trustees nor did they inform us of Synod Council’s action. None of the trustees visited or worshiped with us until Larry House attended Sunday morning worship three weeks before Synod Assembly, well after the trustees attempted to close our church and after a letter from the Bishop was mailed to our congregants informing them the church was closing. One visit by one trustee to one worship service at our church which sponsors nine or more worship services a month is of no statistical merit, yet it is the only worship statistic cited in the Trustees Report.

GLARING OMISSIONS IN THE REPORT

While not exhaustive, there are key glaring omissions in the Trustees Report that merit comment.

1. There is no mention in this report that we had developed a comprehensive five-year ministry plan for our church or that we presented it to the Bishop on November 1, 2007. We had informed the named “fact-finders” (the trustees) in July, 2007 that this plan was expected to be complete in late September, 2007. A strong work in progress covering *all aspects of Redeemer*, the plan was thoroughly reviewed and finally approved by our ten-member council in October. It was subsequently approved by the entire congregation on February 24, 2007. This report is available on our website.

2. There is no mention that at this same meeting, eight of our ten-member council were present with the Bishop and presented a council resolution to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya. Pastor Festo had reviewed all our financial reports and agreed to the terms of his proposed compensation. He had given us a five-year ministry commitment. Despite numerous polite requests, the Bishop's office never responded to our resolution, and appears to have intentionally refused to act on our resolution to call Pastor Festo.
3. This report fails to mention our roughly 18-month attempt to unite with Epiphany. Many of their conclusions are based on this time frame when our council members met jointly with Epiphany and were sharing expenses and leadership. These joint council meetings were recorded by Epiphany council members and do not appear in our records. Our disappointment at Epiphany's decision to break the Covenant (which was supported by the Bishop without consultation of all parties involved in the covenant) was thoroughly discussed with the trustees who at the time were representing themselves to us as "fact-finders." The trustees made no recommendations and offered no oversight or assistance.
4. The report fails to mention that Redeemer is debt-free and owns free and clear its valuable church building on a corner lot in East Falls, long ago paid for by those who are now resting with the Lord in the peace of salvation, while Redeemer's congregants continue this good work for the Lord, faithful to the purpose for which this church exists. Redeemer also owns the adjoining land and building currently under a long-term lease with KenCrest Services on a triple net basis at market rates. The report ignores the fact that Redeemer has the right to use its property in a variety of ways to support our ministry. Redeemer has all along been well grounded to financially support its ministry.
5. This report omits the fact that the Bishop wrote to our congregation without consultation with our members or our leadership, declaring our church to be closed and demanding immediate control and transfer of all assets. Contrary to the important constitutional provisions, Redeemer never requested or concurred in any synodical administration of the Synod towards Redeemer, and the constitution of Synod does not allow for "involuntary synodical administration" or the unwarranted conduct by the Bishop towards Redeemer resulting from such an imposition.

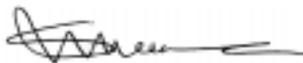
Finally, at most, if Synod Assembly is to be involved in our situation as a forum for appeal, a fair way must be provided for the true and proper representation of facts regarding our church. Thus far, this is not happening. If Synod Assembly persists as the reviewing body of any appeal, without correction of the path thus far, Redeemer is placed in an undesirable position of criticizing both the Bishop and the Assembly, with no benefit for anyone towards a fair resolution of the current circumstances.

A PROPOSED REMEDY

It is our desire, as communicated earlier to the Bishop, to use this year to advance our ministry, which continues to grow and thrive despite current burdensome circumstances. We therefore ask Synod Council to take immediate action on our resolution to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya. Although our resolution from November, 2007 is for a regularized call, we will accept a term-call for this year. This would be a positive step for both Synod Council and Redeemer to remain strong in our respective ministries and missions and would begin mending broken relationships.

Thank you for your careful consideration of our continuing ministries and congregation.

In Christ:



Stanley Meena, Synod Assembly Delegate
and Redeemer Congregation President

cc: Redeemer Council
Bishop Mark S, Hanson
Bishop Clare Burkat
Trustees: Tracey Beasley; J. Lawrence House, AIM; the Rev. Lee Miller II; the Rev. Raymond Miller
Rev. Patricia Davenport
J. Stephen Woodside, Esquire
John I. Gordon, Esquire

Redeemer Lutheran Church

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May 22, 2008

www.redeemereastfalls.com or www.redeemereastfalls.org

To: Bishop Mark Hanson, ELCA
From: Redeemer Congregation, East Falls, Philadelphia

Attached is a courtesy copy of a letter from the president of Redeemer Lutheran Church, East Falls, Philadelphia, written to the individual members of SEPA Synod Council. It addresses the report of Synod Council-appointed trustees concerning our congregation, which was read on the floor of Synod Assembly on May 3, 2008. This report was not shared with our congregation in advance. Fortunately, we had notified SEPA leadership that because of their failure to communicate with us regarding procedures for any appeal, that we would have to postpone our appeal to a later Synod Assembly.

Having now experienced the synod's provisions for appeal, we can see that the floor of Synod Assembly is an inadequate forum for hearing the complex issues of our appeal which has at stake the future of a congregation and the disposition of some \$2 million in property and assets. We hope that a better way can be found.

We have communicated our desire to use this year to advance our ministry and to work with Pastor Festo Mutashobya to that end, hoping that our continued success would be sufficient evidence to resolve the Synod's issues with our congregation. There has been no response to our request. Recently, we heard from a Synod Council member that Synod has no intention of working with us, citing their anger at the events of February 24, when the bishop attempted to lock us out of our church. This unfortunate happening has been wildly misrepresented, as evidenced in the report read at assembly. The long record of unreturned calls and correspondence supports the sentiment of this rumor. Furthermore, we hear that the "plan" is to ask our African members to resign so as to validate the "diminished numbers" provision in the constitution — after the fact. Unconstitutionality aside, this is more evidence of our previous assertion that Synod defines our congregation along racial lines.

Despite this disheartening attitude, our people are united in our diversity. Our church continues to grow and bond. Weekly Bible study has doubled in size over the last year. Although it began as mostly women, men are beginning to attend these two-hour discussions. We are planning a summer program for our children. Having had no pastoral services of any kind since February 24, our worship attendance continues to be double and some Sundays triple the statistics of a year ago. Our lay leaders are developing worship leadership skills, with virtually everyone contributing regularly. We are upbeat in our devotion and service to our Christian community and confident in our mission.

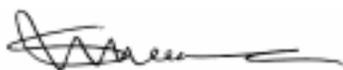
Synod fails to realize that 97% of our congregation has joined within the last 10 years. We have a new, vibrant, "transformed" congregation. Regretfully, Synod remains mired in prejudices of a past only two of our members remember.

Our congregation is much stronger than synod would have anyone believe. We are organized and united. Our people are well-educated professionals — many are entrepreneurs and leaders in their secular careers and willing to share their skills. We continue to attract visitors who show interest in our church and would readily join if we had a pastor to visit and nurture their involvement. Our goal of adding 12-15 new members this year is entirely realistic and would, with the baptism of several new infants, bring our membership close to 100. We have a clearly defined mission and plan. The synod has offered no direction or plan for us but closure. Belief in the God of the Possible mandates that our congregation's efforts be recognized and nurtured to the glory of that same God.

We still have hope that during this year, more effective channels of communication with Synod and Synod Council can be opened and that a remedy can be found that is fair to our congregation. As it stands, all proposed avenues toward peaceful resolution are coming from our congregational members.

We would welcome any help you might be able to give in motivating Synod leadership to work with our congregation.

Thank you.



Redeemer Lutheran Church

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June 19, 2008

To: Bishop Mark Hanson, ELCA
From: Redeemer Congregation, East Falls, Philadelphia

We at Redeemer Lutheran Church in East Falls are continuing to thrive and to build our congregation despite the conflict we are having with SEPA Synod. We feel confident and prayerful that we will prevail with our ministry, despite the formidable roadblocks placed in our way. Since we reported 49 new members in November 2007, we have added three more adult members and have two infants awaiting baptism. We have had several visitors returning frequently and have good reason to believe that they will join us soon.

Although we would welcome the opportunity for positive discussion over the future of Redeemer as an active member church with Synod, it is now clear that closing Redeemer and additional new litigation is the only outcome Synod envisions for our congregation. Amidst this unfairness, Redeemer will continue to pursue and defend the litigation Synod has brought on us. However, Redeemer will also continue to pursue a satisfactory resolution to this strife and to propose avenues to peaceful resolution, as we feel mandated by the Lord to do.

The facts are clear. Redeemer is a growing congregation. Our membership is more than four times what it was in 1998 when Bishop Almquist released us from synodical administration, and *all are active in church ministry*. For years, while the synod told us there were no pastors, we managed to find Lutheran pastors to help us on our own, forming strong bonds with many of them. For the most part they were retired and of limited ability to provide us with all the services we would have liked, but we have always had hard-working and capable lay people assisting and so we are many times stronger today.

Based on this success, we approached Bishop Claire Burkat last November with a well-researched and thoughtful plan to reinforce the progress we had made without a pastor and to further build our ministry in our neighborhood. We presented as a model congregation, and have been asking for her approval of our call to the Rev. Festo Mutashobya since last October, under an approved call and compensation plan from our Congregation Council, which has also been approved by our congregation. Bishop Burkat has never responded to our resolution to call Pastor Festo. The Bishop has refused to acknowledge our Ministry Plan (an exciting, viable, long-term plan any Lutheran congregation would be proud to implement), and overall has refused to help our growing church.

While our congregation remains excited about our ministry prospects, it is disappointing that all of our congregation's continued hard work remains totally unrecognized by bishop Burkat and SEPA Synod. We are faithful people doing responsible and innovative mission work, *and our congregants are able and willing to do the Lord's work in ministry!* In this regard, we have been long searching for pastoral support to further our exceptional ministry efforts in our urban setting. Within the past year, we have found several pastors willing and able to serve who now decline us only because the Synod will not approve a call, and synod's actions are causing further ?????

This is a tragic situation, of which we feel the national church should be aware. We continue to hope and pray SEPA and ELCA will work with us and bring a resolution to the ongoing situation that is so disheartening.

In this regard, we propose to limit our request for a regular call to a one-year term call. Upon the conclusion of the one-year period, Redeemer would then make our appeal of Bishop Burkat's decision to close our church. Under the circumstances, it is both fair and right that our appeal should be presented from the position of strength of one year's ministry, with both Synod and Redeemer holding faithful to our respective constitutions and obligations thereunder.

We have written several times to Bishop Burkat with this request. The bishop has not responded to any of our correspondence for the last year and has ignored Redeemer's faithful, unified requests for a resolution of current circumstances. The Synod may gain a strong neighborhood ministry in granting our request and certainly has nothing to lose in working with Redeemer to resolve unnecessary conflicts. We hope you will support our request as it is an avenue to peace which everyone should be able to live with as faithful Christians.

Meanwhile, we have been invited to attend a conference on African ministry to be held in Minnesota. We intend to try to send representatives to that meeting to share our successful approach to uniting diverse communities, as this type of ministry is in line with the current thriving ministries at Redeemer, which ELCA is poised to support.

Together in ministry, and in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stanley Meena', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stanley Meena
Congregation President

Redeemer Lutheran Church

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June 30, 2008

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631

Dear Bishop Hanson,

We at Redeemer Lutheran Church in East Falls are continuing to thrive and to build our congregation despite the conflict we are having with SEPA Synod. We feel confident and prayerful that we will prevail with our ministry, despite the formidable roadblocks placed in our way. Since we reported 49 new members in November of 2007, we have added four more adult members and have two infants awaiting baptism. We have had several visitors returning frequently and have good reason to believe that they will join us soon.

Although we would welcome the opportunity for positive discussion over the future of Redeemer as an active member church with Synod, it is now clear that closing Redeemer and additional new litigation is the only outcome Synod envisions for our congregation. Amidst this unfairness, Redeemer will continue to pursue and defend the litigation Synod has brought on us. However, Redeemer will also continue to pursue a satisfactory resolution to this strife, and to propose avenues to peaceful resolution, as we feel mandated by the Lord to do so.

The facts are clear. Redeemer is a growing congregation. Our membership is more than four times what it was in 1998 when Bishop Almquist released us from synodical administration, and all are *active in church ministry*. For years, while the synod told us there were no pastors, we managed to find Lutheran pastors to help us on our own, forming strong bonds with many of them. For the most part they were retired and of limited ability to provide us with all the services we would have liked, but we have always had hard-working and capable lay people assisting and so we are many times stronger today.

Based on this success, we approached Bishop Claire Burkat last November with a well researched and thoughtful plan to reinforce the progress we had made without a pastor and to further build our ministry in our neighborhood. We presented as a model congregation, and asked for her approval of our call to the Rev. Festo Mutashobya, since last October when Pastor Festo received an approved call and compensation plan from our Congregation Council. Bishop Burkat has never responded to our resolution to call Pastor Festo. The Bishop has refused to acknowledge our Ministry Plan (an exciting, viable, long-term plan any Lutheran congregation would be proud to implement), and overall has refused to help our growing church.

While our congregation remains excited about our ministry prospects, it is disappointing that all of our congregation's continued hard work remains totally unrecognized by Bishop Burkat and SEPA Synod. We are faithful people doing responsible and innovative mission work, *and the congregants are able and willing to do the Lord's work in ministry!*

In this regard, we have been long searching for pastoral support to further our exceptional ministry efforts in our urban setting. Within the past year, we have found several pastors willing and able to serve who now decline us only because the Synod will not approve the call.

This is tragic situation, of which we feel the national church should be aware. We continue to hope and pray SEPA and ELCA will work with us to bring a resolution to the ongoing situation that is so disheartening. In this regard, we propose to limit our request for a regular call to a one-year term call. Upon the conclusion of the one year period, Redeemer would then make our appeal of Bishop Burkat's decision to close our church. Under the circumstances, it is both fair and right that our appeal should be presented from the position of strength of one year's ministry, with both synod and Redeemer holding faithful to our respective constitutions and obligations thereunder. We have written several times to Bishop Burkat with this request. The bishop has not responded to any of our correspondence for the last year, and has ignored Redeemer's faithful, unified requests for a resolution of current circumstances.

The Synod may gain a strong neighborhood ministry in granting our request, and certainly has nothing to lose in working with Redeemer to resolve unnecessary conflicts. We hope you will support our request as it is an avenue to peace which everyone should be able to live with as faithful Christians.

Meanwhile, we have been invited to attend a conference on African ministry to be held in Minnesota. We intend to send representatives to that meeting to share our successful approach to uniting diverse communities, as this type of ministry is in line with the current thriving ministries at Redeemer, which ELCA is poised to support.

Together in ministry, and in Christ,



Stanley Meena
Congregation President

cc: Redeemer Council
Bishop Mark S, Hanson
Bishop Clare Burkat
Trustees: Tracey Beasley; J. Lawrence House, AIM; the Rev. Lee Miller II; the Rev. Raymond Miller
Rev. Patricia Davenport

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July 27, 2008

To: Bishop Mark Hanson, ELCA
From: Redeemer Congregation, East Falls, Philadelphia

We just received the recent ELCA publication *Seeds of the Parish*. The cover story about the parish which circulates its Bibles describes a church much like Redeemer!

We, too, are an intergenerational church. We are also an ethnically mixed congregation which has achieved a cohesiveness that surpasses cultural differences. Redeemer strives to make sure that no culture is dominant in our worship and leadership, and that everyone is always learning something new. For example some congregants speak Swahili, some French, some English . . . so we take the time to learn a song together in American Sign Language.

There is a story in all of this, in how our church tripled in size in one year and bonded diverse cultures. Unfortunately, with the prejudice and litigation we face within the Synod, our good news (52 new members in nine months!) is difficult to share. No one at the Synod or Synod Council level takes any initiative to see for themselves what our congregation is like, relying instead on reports of people with minimal, biased, and dated knowledge of our congregation.

After the Synod Assembly, we took a great deal of time to answer the “trustees” report published and read at Assembly — an unfair report issued with no review or verification with our members. Our effort to make correction of this inaccurate and false information was sincere and timely, and appropriately published. To date, not one Synod staff or council member has responded or investigated for themselves where the truth in our conflict with the Synod lies. This starts with Bishop Burkat and follows to the “trustees” and to Synod Council and other leaders, including your high office.

One Synod council member, whom we will not name, has informed us that the Bishop and Council have no intention of working with us, verifying our view that SEPA Synod has long honored our property and assets, but not our hard-working congregants who are Lutheran in worship, and true believers in a Christ-centered faith. We might not be embroiled in the current costly conflict if Synod had taken the time to visit and minister to Redeemer—as the Bishop herself promised and as the “trustees” were charged—*before* throwing us under involuntary administration and then suing us.

Last week was a very special at Redeemer. The whole congregation rallied to hold a party for one of our high school graduates. Since this son of our congregation was also a graduate of the Ken Crest Day Care School associated with our church, we made an effort to invite Ken Crest families and the immediate neighborhood, and many came to celebrate and partake.

The occasion had everyone working together. In fact, the work crew included visitors invited by members, and all enjoyed the fellowship amidst the company of potential new members! The day of the party was sweltering hot, but that didn't stop us from having a wonderful day, starting with worship featuring a boychoir, a picnic and an afternoon rock concert. People were coming and going from Redeemer for five hours, enjoying worship, music and fellowship, and even prayer. A week later our people offered a special prayer of thanksgiving and shared the news with friends — the seeds of continued growth.

Redeemer is a growing church. We can only speculate how we might be growing without the current conflict which should be resolved. We have followed your advice to try to work with the bishop. We have made sensible proposals that we are confident would lead to peaceful resolution and would cost the Synod nothing to implement. Redeemer's efforts are ignored. We have

never received a single response from any of the letters we have written to the Bishop or “trustees.” This follows a year of unreturned phone calls to the dean and former mission developer, and others in charge at the Synod.

The only response has been more, harsher litigation, now inexplicably aimed at our congregation and our church leaders personally. If this is the standard format within the Lutheran Church for conflict resolution, who would ever desire to worship and join a Lutheran church, to become a church leader, and to work for the welfare and glory of God, and not ourselves?

Again, we write to you in hope that in your role as shepherd of shepherds you might be able to personally assist in bringing a resolution to the current matters involving Redeemer. Unfortunately, we no longer have a voice or advocate in the SEPA Synod or its Bishop.

Together in ministry, and in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stanley Meena', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stanley Meena
Congregation President

cc: Redeemer Council
Bishop Clare Burkat
Trustees: Tracey Beasley; J. Lawrence House, AIM; the Rev. Lee Miller II; the Rev. Raymond Miller
Rev. Patricia Davenport

Redeemer Lutheran Church

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August 24, 2008

To: Bishop Mark Hanson, ELCA
From: Redeemer Congregation, East Falls, Philadelphia

Dear Bishop Hanson,

Redeemer, East Falls, Philadelphia, continues to build its multicultural ministry, while looking for resolution of our issues with SEPA Synod. We have pointed out in letter after letter to both you and Bishop Burkat, we are a growing church in spite of the continuing positions of Synod. Knowing that ministry at Redeemer in East Falls is vibrant and showing significant results in every area of our church's mission, our congregation would be in defiance of our Christian mission to do anything but protest the Bishop's destructive policies toward our church, our people, and our neighborhood. Our situation is not unlike the Canaanite woman persisting in her demands for Jesus' attention. We, too, are on the outside of the ELCA looking in. We are persistent in our quest. We are prayerful and will continue to meet these obstacles with patience and honor towards our Lord.

The situation seems to be beyond resolution at the local level. We first wrote to you in February when it was clear that Bishop Burkat, without any attempt to work with our leaders, was planning to forcibly seize our property and assets. You encouraged us to attempt to work together. We have been diligent in following your advice, but all attempts are one-sided. Bishop Burkat and synod representatives ignore all our proposals for compromise and to find ways to work together to preserve our neighborhood's valuable ministry, our urban property assets (which if lost to ministry would be nearly impossible to replace) and our vital Christian witness.

We have accepted into membership a total of 52 members since last October and there are more who attend regularly that are likely prospects for membership. Two infants have been born within the last six months that could be baptized into our community. By the time you read this there will be a third new baby, which would bring our membership to 80. We are well on our way to our 100-member goal by next summer. Attendance is growing at both worship and mid-week Bible study, which is often three hours long with spirited discussion. Good things are happening here. In August we added an additional monthly worship service which was well attended and we expect to expand this offering in the fall.

There are *two* pastors interested in serving us, but they fear the ELCA's repercussion. The ELCA is clearly misguided if its rostered leaders cannot act on call and conviction without fear of its own hierarchical processes. These circumstances are reminiscent of the medieval thinking that spawned the Reformation and the Lutheran Church. The present course is the obverse of any true Christian ministry and witness and a path we cannot imagine faithful church leaders would have any real interest in condoning.

Our congregation turned to the courts only when it was clear that forcible seizure of our property was imminent. It was clear to us that if this was allowed to happen before we had our constitutional right of appeal, we would face Synod Assembly from a position of weakness caused by the premature dismantling of our ministry. Subsequent events proved our fears to be well grounded; this is precisely the course Bishop Burkat pursued. Since there is no prescribed process or even a constitutional basis for what Bishop Burkat was attempting, there was also a lack of prescribed course for us to follow. These are now legal issues turned over to legal counsel on both sides.

Bishop Burkat responded by suing our congregation and selected individual church members personally, attempting to damage our leaders' reputations and threatening their families' livelihoods. There seems to have been no consideration of how such an action will affect future volunteer leaders churchwide who dare to act with anything but unquestioning obedience.

All evidence is that the decision to close our church was made long before any investigation of our circumstances, without any of us ever having met our new bishop!

Redeemer is following constitutional processes, both in the operation of our church which has always been faithful to the hierarchical church and its government, even without any assist from synod for nearly a decade. We have asked to be permitted to work with a pastor while we prepare our appeal. With no clergy voice, we need an advocate to encourage resolution if this conflict is to be resolved within the church.

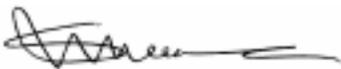
These are important issues for the entire ELCA. We know that if these constitutional questions are not addressed now, other small congregations will have to fashion ministries knowing that the services of synod can be cut off at any time, and they too will find themselves fending for themselves while the church does nothing but wait to seize assets.

There are other avenues which creative leadership could propose to bring those involved in this conflict together for the mutual betterment of ministry. We would welcome an unbiased mediation process. But again, all ideas for peaceful resolution are coming from us and are met with no response.

We want everyone to remain strong in ministry, both our congregations and our synodical leaders. If the church is to serve and care about urban neighborhoods we must find ways to preserve neighborhood ministries, as we have accomplished without any assist from synod for many years — and with success! We need your personal help to find a peaceful resolution of the issues which stand in our way. We ask that the pastors who have expressed interest in serving us be permitted to serve our congregation without fear of reprisal.

Failing this we will continue on our path of growth, at a slower pace than we could be achieving, but all indications are that we will continue to gain ground in both numbers and financial stability. To God be the honor and glory.

Together in ministry, and in Christ,



Stanley Meena
Congregation President

cc: Redeemer Council
Bishop Mark S, Hanson
Bishop Claire Burkat
Trustees: Tracey Beasley; J. Lawrence House, AIM; the Rev. Lee Miller II; the Rev. Raymond Miller
Rev. Patricia Davenport

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September 30, 2008

To: Bishop Mark Hanson, ELCA
From: Redeemer Congregation, East Falls, Philadelphia

Dear Bishop Hanson,

We were delighted on September 7 to welcome the Rev. Patricia Davenport to our Sunday morning worship. Her visit was not announced and so we know that she can be assured that she witnessed Redeemer as we truly are. It was especially meaningful to our people because this was the first time a pastor involved in our conflict with SEPA Synod has joined us in worship. (Pastor Davenport visited with us once prior to February 24 before she seemed to be aware of the extent of the conflict.) On this Sunday morning, we were able to demonstrate that all that we have been claiming in our written correspondence to you and to SEPA representatives is true.

We do not know what Pastor Davenport's impressions were as she spent very little time talking with us after church, but we do know that on this Sunday morning, even with many of our people traveling, we had 33 people present in worship. We had 11 visitors, more than half of them repeat visitors. Although the morning featured both Swahili and English worship and Pastor Davenport attended the English service, she could see that our Swahili membership was well represented in the English service.

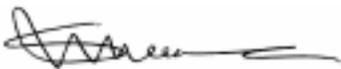
Notably, Pastor Davenport could see that there are no divisions in our congregation and that white and black, English and Swahili and others, worship and work as one. She could see that there were many involved in worship leadership. She could see that worship was spirit-filled and an expression of all present. She could see that we are demonstrably ONE church, exactly as we have been saying all along.

Our church has continued to grow throughout the summer and we have high hopes that a fall membership drive will add another 10-12 to our membership roster, which will make our membership more than 90!

The proof of our ministry's strength is in our worship and fellowship and the willingness of lay leadership and all of our members to step up, join together and worship together in the name of the Lord. We welcome Pastor Davenport and any other pastors to come and experience the Holy Spirit at work at Redeemer for yourselves.

Perhaps it is time for you to revisit Redeemer's long-standing requests, consistent with a resolution of nearly *one year ago*, to call a Pastor to Redeemer.

Yours in Christ,



Stanley Meena
Congregation President

cc: Redeemer Council
Bishop Claire Burkat
Trustees: Tracey Beasley; J. Lawrence House, AIM; the Rev. Lee Miller II; the Rev. Raymond Miller
Rev. Patricia Davenport

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October 6, 2008

To: Bishop Mark Hanson, ELCA
From: Redeemer Congregation, East Falls, Philadelphia

Dear Bishop Hanson,

We would like to share with you the recent testimony of one of our newest members at Redeemer Lutheran Church who joined our fellowship just months ago. This young professional man has worshiped in churches around the world and has been attending our Wednesday night Bible Study and Prayer Meetings. At our latest meeting he shared his feelings about Redeemer. "What I like about this church," he said, "is, yes, we are small, but everyone is involved, everyone sits down with one another and shares. There is support for one another."

This is indeed one of Redeemer's strengths, and it is a strength that is not going to be revealed under a microscopic examination of outdated records and old prejudices. Unfortunately, the "trustees" have attempted to paint a picture of a church where only a few are involved in leadership. Redeemer knows this is not true.

Many congregations have meetings of the congregation only once a year. In contrast, Redeemer's congregation sits together and discusses church life and planning every week. These meetings are not formal, but consensus is reached for the directions members want to pursue, so that when council and leaders meet, they in turn know there is support for their actions.

These informal meetings happen after worship. Many churches have fellowship refreshments after worship. Typically, people grab some coffee and a donut and break into familiar groups for a chat before taking off. Redeemer regularly sits down together and shares conversation over a bowl of soup. We sit together as one body at large tables pushed together to be one, sharing personally how the church can improve our individual faith journeys, and how we can improve the church we all love. Worship is over at 11 a.m., but it is not unusual for our people to still be at the fellowship table at 1 p.m.

This is an intentional step of leadership. Soup is an excellent mixer and answers a host of issues ever present among any Christian gathering.

- Soup is easily brought from home and heated. There are no Marthas working in the kitchen while others mix.
- Many of our immigrant families are divided with some members remaining in Africa. The weekly soup fellowship addresses a common complaint of loneliness. Others like the elderly and singles are also able to dine once a week with people across generations. Community grows.
- Soup is a vehicle for cultural exchange. Our English-speaking members raised on chicken noodle fare are soon sipping soups with ginger, curry, garlic and bananas.
- Visitors are served first, and initial introductions are made in a naturally welcoming and casual way.
- Inevitably, the conversation at these weekly gatherings turns to the growth of our ministry and many good ideas result. Everyone becomes part of the process and people unite behind various projects.
- Leadership grows as well. For example, when we learn that a young member is practicing for a piano recital, he is immediately asked to play for worship and now he is learning parts of the liturgy and soon will be playing on a regular basis. Weeks later, we see him sitting with a young visitor at the piano near the fellowship table, showing her how to play a scale.

Redeemer is concerned this approach to community has been an obstacle to Bishop Burkat's attempts to divide our membership. While the synod views our church as "white Redeemer" and "black Redeemer" (Bishop Burkat's own terms), these labels baffle our members. We are truly one community.

Is there no way to break through the synod's prejudices against our congregation? We long for open, fair dialog that doesn't require us to forfeit our ministry *before* discussions take place. Even before the litigation began, all at synod appeared to be dedicated to following a predetermined path for our congregation where our members are given no say despite the fact that the constitution clearly calls for concurrence of congregations to synodical administration and further requires such administration to be temporary. If these actions are to be condoned and defended by the ELCA, the circumstances point to serious flaws which must be addressed for the betterment of our entire denomination.

Again, we look to you to help us find an advocate for any of our proposals for peaceful resolution. To enumerate, in previous correspondence we have

- presented a solid five-year plan to grow our church's membership and stewardship, which we are actively implementing with success even under strained conditions.
- suggested working with the synod for a year with Pastor Mutashobya (or another qualified pastoral candidate) to see if any issues synod might have with our congregation might be resolved with a pastor as liaison.
- proposed a truth and reconciliation process similar to that which was so effective in the seemingly hopeless conflict in South Africa.
- suggested an unbiased mutually agreed upon mediation process.
- and finally, if synod has no desire to work with us, we have asked to be assigned to a different synod or even to form a new synod for multicultural congregations. Our special needs seem to surpass the willingness of the current synod structure, or the Bishop, to consider *any* of our recent, sensible proposals.

This conflict with Synod is now in its second year. The failure to actively discuss or even *consider* a peaceful resolution to this current situation is contrary to the deep tenets of Holy Scripture, and only fosters continued prejudice among church leaders who have no incentive to seek truth independently or help an active, thriving body of believers. The ELCA must allow its congregations a say in their future. The respective constitutions clearly require this. A peaceful, acceptable resolution can be reached with benefits to all.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Yours in ministry,
Redeemer Church Council



Stanley Meena
Congregation President

cc: Redeemer Council
Bishop Claire Burkat
Trustees: Tracey Beasley; J. Lawrence House, AIM; the Rev. Lee Miller II; the Rev. Raymond Miller
Rev. Patricia Davenport

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November 26, 2008

Bishop Claire Burkat
Pastor Patricia Davenport
Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson

Dear Bishop Burkat, Pastor Davenport and Bishop Hanson,

Attached is a comprehensive report of the status of our ministry and parish over the past year, which our council has reviewed and approved for release to SEPA synod, and most particularly, your offices.

As you know, on November 1, 2007, eight of our ten member council met with Bishop Burkat and the appointed trustees and, along with other important agenda, presented our five-year plan for ministry (the "Plan"). This plan is posted on our congregational web site. The Plan was developed with input from experts and congregation council and has the unanimous support of all members.

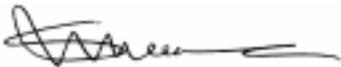
Unfortunately, there has been no comment on this Plan from synod or any of its representatives. In fact, after we presented the Plan (the centerpiece was the call of a pastor who had agreed to the terms of the plan), there followed four months of silence from the bishop, although the timing was ripe for feedback coupled with Synod's assistance which was specifically promised in 2007. Notably, many points of the Plan have already been implemented, in spite of the fact that Bishop Burkat's February 2008 closure letter made no reference to this Plan, and the Plan likewise was never mentioned in the trustees' report to Synod Assembly.

Our congregational leaders immediately informed the bishop of our intent to appeal the closure decision, which was unfairly made based upon outdated and incomplete records. There was no consultation with the congregation for any explanation of the paucity of information found in these documents which is now being used to attempt to take control of our property and assets and terminate our faithful ministry. Over the past months, we have suggested many remedies to these unfair practices all of which are ignored at every level, which is a significant disappointment to all of our members.

We feel the conflict should come to an end. Legal questions aside, all issues remain open and attached for adjudication before the courts. Synod now has the power to end this. Rest assured, Redeemer will continue to challenge any decision which damages our congregation and our neighborhood ministry which we have fostered with our own contributions and efforts for more than 100 years. The members who have been sued personally will seek full redress before the courts for all available relief. This conflict, left unresolved, promises to go on for years. Redeemer will challenge any decision which attempts to force us into closure without constitutional basis.

Meanwhile, Redeemer, always faithful, has actively worked the Plan as originally presented. We have written to Bishop Mark Hanson and Bishop Burkat with progress reports on a regular basis, copied synod leadership, and posted these reports on our web site. Not surprisingly, our Plan is yielding results. Knowing that the Lord is working among us, we are grateful to be able report this information to you.

In Christ and faith,



Stanley Meena
Redeemer Congregational Council, Redeemer Membership

Report on the Status of Redeemer Lutheran Church, East Falls

November 26, 2008

ORGANIZATION

At our February 24 Annual Meeting, (the same day Synod attempted to lock our congregation out of God's house), we unanimously adopted the five-year Plan officially and elected a new council. Officers were elected at subsequent first meeting of the old and new council, as our constitution calls for.

We spent several months addressing our members' concerns about the bishop's actions and then synod's June legal attack on our congregation and individual members of our church, but we soon settled into a rhythm of worship, ministry planning and educational programs. Some members continued to stay away in understandable fear, but none have left. We are in regular communication with all and know that if the issues with the synod could be resolved, most if not all will return.

MEMBERSHIP

In addition, to the 49 members which joined our church last October, we have gained six additional new members. They have been among the most active in building the church, having signed on in full knowledge of this unfortunate conflict. There are also several infants among our membership awaiting baptism. Again, it is the ongoing litigation with synod that presents an ongoing impediment to outreach and full commitment on the part of prospective members.

LENT & EASTER

The attempted lockout happened just two weeks before we were to host the community for a mid-Week Lenten service. We were initially encouraged when Pastor Davenport asked to meet two days later with Pastor Mutashobya who had been working with us for seven months and who had agreed to accept our call. A day of prayer and fasting was held. Unfortunately, this early opportunity to mend fences was lost and Pastor Mutashobya was discouraged from serving us. He did not return to Redeemer, and he may have accepted an interim pastorship in the suburbs. Despite this huge disappointment, we kept our obligation to the community and performed an original play for this well-attended event. Our Christian neighbors were impressed.

We were apprehensive as Easter approached, and we had no pastor. We asked Synod for a pastor for Holy Week and in answer received a list of churches which would "welcome" us. Our members did not want to spend their holidays as strangers in distant unfamiliar parishes, and Redeemer's members had all of the talents and commitment to faithfully plan and execute our Holy Week. Palm Sunday turned into one of the most joyous celebrations of that great event in the Passion Story that we can remember at Redeemer.

WORSHIP LEADERSHIP, EDUCATION & SPECIAL EVENTS

With no pastoral help whatsoever, our lay leaders settled into sharing worship leadership roles. Awkward at first, our leaders soon became comfortable leading worship. We solicited help from pastors who supplied us with sermons which we adapted for use with our people. Worship leadership and sermon duty is shared among a team of about eight members, each of whom are prepared to fill in as needed on any given Sunday. The most frequent first question of visitors, "Which one of you is the pastor?"

Services are planned a month in advance and so the weekly bulletin is ready to share with worship leaders early in the week prior to Sunday. After the Bishop's attempt to close us, we consolidated English and Swahili worship to preserve our lay leaders energy. This was beneficial as the bond between worship communities grew. Particular attention is given to scripture, and God's word is alive in the hearts of those who desire to serve!

In July, we hosted a SummerFest, a full-day worship and fellowship event, which began with Sunday worship with a guest Boychoir, followed by a community picnic and Rock Concert with two bands. It had been our plan to include Ken-Crest families in this celebration, but their closure announcement was issued the same day we planned to approach them. Even so, more than 125 attended.

In August, we reintroduced monthly Swahili worship. A year ago, attendance at Swahili worship was stronger than the English, but there has been a shift as our church members bonded. There is less need for Swahili language-only worship and monthly Praise and Worship in both languages seems to satisfy.

In September, at the request of families, we started a children's sermon and section of the worship service. We have asked one of our adolescent boys to lead some parts of the children's section of the service. Instead of sitting awkwardly in the pew while we address younger children, he is becoming a leader.

We concentrated on building attendance and we now routinely have double or even triple the attendance that the trustees unfairly reported to Synod Assembly in their May report. We sense a true momentum as we approach the Advent and Christmas holiday seasons.

Our monthly Praise and Worship event has grown from a two-hour prayer and worship meeting to also include guest pastors taking some time to teach. Ever faithful to the ELCA and Redeemer's Constitutions, these services are planned and led by our Swahili members but are held in English. One recent service lasted nearly five hours and included a guest lecture on the topic of faith and a special prayer session with a visitor who told of how she was trying to find a church where she fit in. Interestingly, this Saturday service draws a different set of people. We will continue to monitor and develop this and make changes as the congregation desires.

Our Bible Study group has grown to include a group of twelve regular attendees, both men and women, and frequent visitors. These weekly sessions are always at least two hours long and include singing, sharing, and prayer. All of us view scripture as a most important part of faith and worship, and all who attend can attest to how God reveals himself in his word for his good purpose. The leadership for Bible study is provided by members but several clergy frequently participate.

Our community regularly fasts and prays for our church. We recently completed a 21-day "Daniel" Fast, eating only fruits and vegetables and concentrating on repentance. We posted daily scriptures and a hymn for the day on our web site to assist members in this spiritual venture. This fast was adopted by our full membership. We are truly one worshipping body!

REVENUE & STEWARDSHIP

We worked on developing a web site that we first used to communicate church news but are now expanding to add interactivity. We have had inquiries from across the country about our Swahili ministry from this exposure. We are planning to use our web-site as a revenue stream, supplying Swahili Bibles and religious greeting cards.

Some of our members have experience in community development and they are developing other revenue streams which we hope will not only help Redeemer but the broader urban church (in keeping with the goals of our five-year Plan).

For the second time in 10 years, synod attempted to take over the rental payments of our 25-year tenant, the Lutheran Social Service Agency, Ken Crest. They had just signed a new long-term lease with us, but under the uncertainty of synod's action towards us, they whited out their names on the lease and pulled out of this valued neighborhood program. We were sorry to see our long-standing relationship end, but have been assured by our Realtor that with some minor renovations to the property, we will be able to lease the space for far more than what Ken Crest was paying which will solidify our annual budget and offer a surplus. We are currently making these renovations.

Our goal is not to rely on rent to support our ministry. Rather, our long-term goal within five years, is to have a budget independent of any outside income. We can then use our building as it was originally intended — classroom and church meeting space in keeping with our long-standing Lutheran neighborhood ministry.

In September, council focused on creating a particularized stewardship program. We created a three-tiered giving model and asked each council member to commit to one of the three levels of weekly giving. Most signed on at the highest tiered level and our offerings have already tripled. We are going to unfold the stewardship program to the general church membership within the next few weeks. This approach is a measured step toward our congregational goal of scriptural tithing. This is a significant accomplishment, since teaching stewardship at a time when people sense that synod is waiting to confiscate their offerings is a real challenge.

Along with our five-year Plan for ministry, we would challenge any SEPA member church to match its own level of stewardship with the wherewithal and commitment of Redeemer's members not only to develop such initiatives but to actually make them an integral part of each member's personal walk in faith.

PROPERTY

Redeemer hired a part-time cleaning person to make sure the church is cleaned thoroughly every two weeks. This person also helps to maintain the outside grounds. In addition, we scheduled regular gardening/clean-up days which have been well attended. We are currently updating the utility systems to the Parish Building so that it can be totally independently metered for rental. We have plans to begin renovation of our kitchen/fellowship area. We are purchasing a heating panels which promise to cut winter heating bills significantly. Minor maintenance has been performed by members as needed. Redeemer continues to plan and implement careful faith-based stewardship in this area. Four community groups use our meeting space.

FELLOWSHIP

Our congregation has done a remarkable job in faith through our Lord of blending diverse communities. Some of this has been highlighted above. We have done this by working together on many projects and by hosting weekly socials. Our congregation sits together and shares a light meal once a week. In addition, our members often attend concerts, lectures and theater performances together. We have had four such events this year, each one initiated by a different member (Boychoir concert, Bishop Tutu lecture, two theater events). Our next such event is December 12 when we will attend a presentation by a speaker from the Billy Graham Crusades at the 100th Anniversary of the Philadelphia Bible Society. Since last November, we have held a 3-hour Multicultural Christmas Concert, featuring a Cantata performed by 20 of our members and a children's choir led by one of our teens; an original play at a Community Easter service; Ham dinner on Palm Sunday; Easter Breakfast; SummerFest and are now busy preparing our Christmas holiday events.

OUTREACH & MISSION

Our congregation has been attracting a wide range of people. In addition to the East Africans, recently 11 West Africans from several countries have visited multiple times. In order to effectively communicate our Lutheran doctrine, in October we drafted a 16-page Membership Booklet, which clearly defines our church mission, Lutheran doctrine, our church budget, committee structure, short history and stewardship plan. Every current and potential member is aware and can easily become an active participant in our church's total Lutheran ministry. This material will serve as a valuable tool for any pastor who might accept a call.

Meanwhile, attendance continues to grow and attract visitors. When Rev. Patricia Davenport visited in September, we had 11 visitors. Eight of them have returned multiple times.

Our members joined together as a choir twice this year to perform for other churches. A local newspaper printed a photo of our choir visiting a New York congregation. While these "field trips" temporarily affect our attendance, we are proud to share our talents and joy for the Lord.

Our members participated in a Unity Rally at the public school across the street, which was held in response to racially motivated vandalism incident.

CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Our leaders always have been conscious of compliance with our constitution even during the long periods of time in which Synod has been unable to supply us with pastoral leadership. Our constitutional structure assumes the presence of a pastor and Redeemer feels strongly that all current issues might have been avoided if we had had a pastor under call for the past decade. Notably, most of the constitutional issues asserted by the trustees in their report occurred during the time we were operating under the Covenant with Epiphany (August 2005 to April 2007). Even so, most issues were resolved by mid-2007.

When it was clear that the Covenant was irretrievably broken, Redeemer's leaders immediately set about ensuring that all constitutional provisions were met. Within just two months of Epiphany's departure, our church council was 70% restored. This group concentrated on our Swahili outreach which had been neglected while we worked with Epiphany. By October, council was fully restored and we had identified two pastors interested in serving us. As we recovered from the failure of the Covenant, we have systematically assured compliance with our Constitution. The issues cited in the Trustees Report have not existed for some time.

As a next step, we will soon review our constitution with our new members to suggest changes which fit our current ministry. Although expected to be minor, these changes will be presented to the congregation for review and adoption in accordance with all constitutionally mandated provisions of ELCA.

IN CONCLUSION

All at Redeemer are confident and prayerful that these accomplishments are not in vain. There is an aura of excitement at the prospects for our ministry among our membership. There is no need to underscore a total lack of commitment on the part of our bishop, SEPA Synod or the ELCA. Nevertheless, we are sharing this report with you and all Synod leadership, in prayerful request for some renewed hope and vision at synod for support of our promising ministry.

It is time for all to work in faith to bring this conflict to an end. There can be no question that our congregation is sound, active and faithfully pursuing our mission. Our leaders have behaved responsibly toward the members who elected them and in keeping with our constitution and/or the covenant that was in effect from August 2005 through April 2007. None of the stipulated conditions for Synodical interference under the constitution is applicable to our situation. Congregational polity, which Lutherans historically and constitutionally cherish, must be recognized.

Redeemer has able leaders and a talented and skilled members whose gifts could benefit the church as a whole. It is a tragedy that the conflict is not allowing our light to shine. There are remedies. It is time to pursue them together. We must put the Gospel to work!

We are recommending that a small group of our leaders (no more than four) meet with Pastor Davenport and the Bishop to see if this small group can break through roadblocks and prejudice and focus on the condition and future of Redeemer's ministry, which we know has great potential. Redeemer has long been in a position to call a pastor and can still afford to do so. We know there are Lutheran pastors interested in serving us. Can we not together pave the road so that Redeemer can contribute our considerable talents, skills and knowledge of urban ministry to the ELCA?