

Redeemer Lutheran Church

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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 It is inaccurate and incomplete, and appears to be based on outdated and, in some cases, false information concerning the operation and condition of our church.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 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.

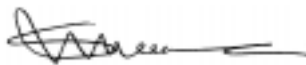
Finally, at most, if Synod Assembly is to be involved in our situation as a forum for appeal, a fair way must be provided for the true and proper representation of facts regarding our church. Thus far, this is not happening. If Synod Assembly persists as the reviewing body of any appeal, without correction 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