

Redeemer Lives

Rev. Patricia Davenport has asked to meet with East Falls Community Council to hear suggestions for the use of Redeemer Church property. The members of Redeemer are offended by Rev. Davenport's attempt to curry favor with the community in a dispute they instigated and which promises to expand an internal conflict to embrace our entire community.

Any community input into the use of Redeemer property is premature and may cause long-term strife. Lutherans of East Falls are capable of planning the use of Lutheran property and in fact presented a detailed plan to SEPA in 2007 which was ignored.*

There is nothing "former" about Redeemer. By our corporate bylaws and charter, we have owned our property for more than 100 years. Redeemer is still a congregation that meets weekly for worship and engages in ministry and mission. There was no congregational decision to close as required by Lutheran governance. Redeemer is a congregation today just as it was in 1891 when it first met on Indian Queen Lane. East Falls Lutherans purchased the land on Midvale. The building was built 19 years later with their faithful sacrifice. It was rebuilt without denominational help when it burned. The educational building was built in the 1960s with our offerings. SEPA Synod locked out the descendants of its founders along with some 75 new residents of East Falls who had made Redeemer their spiritual home. The congregation was self-supporting and growing — an asset to East Falls.

For the last five years, Rev. Davenport and her employer, the Southeastern Pa Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (SEPA), side-stepped their own constitutional policies and bullied their way past the Lutherans of East Falls to gain access to our endowment fund and property value.

Redeemer always shared our property generously with the people of East Falls, a tradition discontinued by Rev. Davenport and SEPA. You, too, have been needlessly locked out for two years and six months.

Redeemer's assets were viewed as easy pickings for a synod in serious financial distress. In SEPA's corporate mindset, the property of East Falls is worth more than the people of East Falls.

East Falls, a desirable working class neighborhood, is a frequent target of corporate ideas that put private agenda before community. The people of St. James the Less were evicted by their diocese a decade ago. The loss of MCP is a secular example. Then came Redeemer. Now, St. Bridget's School is endangered. Other people covet what we have created. *This pattern should alarm EFCC.*

The people of Redeemer still claim rights to the land under Lutheran governance, which forbids bishops and synods from taking congregational property.

Under SEPA's own rules, any plan for Redeemer's property must begin with the return of the property to the Lutherans of East Falls.*

We ask our neighbors in East Falls to consider these facts.

- The buildings on the corner of Midvale and Conrad are empty because Rev. Davenport and her colleagues made them empty. Their plan was to sell this property to meet synod's substantial deficit (healthy six figures annually). They did not know there was a mortgage on the property, which hindered their plans. They have allowed the mortgage to fall into default and are insisting the Lutherans of East Falls repay the loan while they take the property that yielded the income to pay the congregation's obligations.
- SEPA's meddling influenced the 25-year Ken Crest Daycare program—which a generation of East Falls children attended—to close. The closing helped SEPA's cause, squeezing Redeemer economically. But Redeemer worked to create its own day care program much like the program run by Mrs. Hardcastle before Ken Crest came to Redeemer. The day care, scheduled to open in 2009, was evicted along with the congregation. It would have served the neighborhood and paid the congregation's loan. The loss of these programs has been a loss to all of East Falls and was totally unwarranted.
- Unlike the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church is not hierarchical. Lutheran congregations

purchase their own property, build their own buildings and have managerial authority over their ministries. There was no doctrinal dispute, which courts *should* steer clear of.

- The dwindling resources of denominations and a difficult economy have created many similar court conflicts. To our knowledge, the case in East Falls is the only case where a church judicatory sued individuals—while claiming immunity from the law for themselves. Claims to care about the neighborhood after four years of vicious personal attacks on individual Fallers should be looked upon with suspicion.
- A four-year court battle ended in a split decision. Five appellate judges determined that the courts should not hear the case under the First Amendment separation of church and state. However, two dissenting judges concluded that if the law were applied (and why shouldn't it?), Redeemer's position has merit.
- There is potential for continued court challenges. A similar case pending in Pa courts has been favoring the congregation.
- The eviction of the people of Redeemer—never required by the court and first attempted by stealth nearly two years earlier—had one purpose: to weaken the congregation to make taking our property easier. Instead—with East Falls fortitude—Redeemer continues as a worshipping and serving congregation, meeting in the Old Academy Playhouse. Over the last two years, despite incredible hardships imposed by SEPA, we are continuing our ministry in important, creative and potentially lucrative ways and are receiving world-wide recognition. We are preparing for the rightful return of our property.
- After the court ruling and for several years before, neither Pastor Davenport nor any member of SEPA has shown any pastoral care for the members of Redeemer. That's their job — not managing East Falls real estate.

Perhaps EFCC does not care about Redeemer but only the property. Taking a community stand on a disputed property will draw the community into conflict.

If SEPA Synod is truly interested in the people of East Falls and their ideas for the use of our sacred land, they should begin by showing interest in East Falls Lutherans.