



A Hopeful Manifesto

Ministry in East Falls, by East Falls, and for the people of East Falls and Northwest Philadelphia
The Annual Report of Redeemer Independent Lutheran Church, East Falls
January 16, 2014

The people of Redeemer have always been a hopeful people.

This manifesto poses two theories:

1. There is more **economic potential** in keeping Redeemer (and other small churches) open.
2. There is more **mission potential** in keeping Redeemer (and other small churches) open.

Closing churches in our region has become an admission of failure for the entire Church. Presented as mission strategy, it is a thinly veiled means of controlling assets of congregations. Replication encourages this as acceptable and “wise.”

Redeemer is not the only victim of this short-sighted management strategy, but we are the church that stood up for our ministry against unwelcome odds— 160 member churches pooling corporate resources to squeeze out one small church for the benefit of the corporate bottom line.

The attention placed on the statistics of smaller congregations (in our case dated and/or fabricated) deflects attention from statistics of all member churches, including large churches.

ELCA TREND reports for congregations in our region, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod (SEPA) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, reveal that mission giving is down by double digits in almost every congregation. Larger churches that usually provide major funding for the regional office are having a difficult time. Mission giving is down as much as 88.5% since 2005. Go back a few more years and the statistics are even more dire. These churches, equally or even more challenged than Redeemer, claim the right to vote on other churches' assets. This defies Lutheran polity and defeats the mission of the Church.

Study the statistics. If churches maintain their pre-recession giving to the regional body, there will be no money for congregations to do more than maintain property and pay staff. Most churches have budgets geared to survival—not outreach.

Redeemer was getting by with less too. But we were doing exactly as SEPA asks of its congregations. We innovated and took calculated risks—**using our own resources**. SEPA was not subsidizing Redeemer.

Our efforts showed many signs of success.

The history and proof is on our web site:

2x2virtualchurch.com

Clearly, Redeemer was stronger than anyone knew. We have withstood six years of legal battles. We have continued to grow not only in numbers but have been pioneering what the church needs to become in the new Information Age.

SEPA today is on the threshold of making a huge mistake that will affect forever their ability to minister to the neighborhoods of NW Philadelphia, which includes the largest geographic neighborhood in the city.

In other words, they are making a decision that makes it impossible for them to fulfill their mission in a large part of their territory.

SEPA is selling Redeemer property—despite all promises made to Redeemer, the courts, and community to the dedication to Word and Sacrament ministry here.

Once land is sold, reestablishing a mission presence in this area will be economically unfeasible, especially when the resources of this region have been dedicated to plugging SEPA deficits.

There is great mission potential in East Falls and other middle- to upper-class neighborhoods. Had our land values been low and had Redeemer not been blessed with a sizeable endowment, Redeemer probably would have been left alone. But land in East Falls is more valuable in the eyes of the Church than our people or our mission.

The assets provided for ministry to these neighborhoods have been steadily picked over for the last 25 years—the entire history of the ELCA. First, Grace in Lower Roxborough. Then, Epiphany in Upper Roxborough. Then, Redeemer. Only Bethany remains with a questionable future.

SEPA has taken millions from our neighborhood and resists putting anything back with ridiculous pontification. “There is no population to support a church here.”

They tested their strategy in NW Philadelphia with little initial resistance. That became SEPA's expectation. But Lutherans are charged to stand up for their ministries. Our polity is congregational, not hierarchical. We are supposed to be interdependent. That requires working together and dialog. This has been absent.

Major assets for ministry (our united mission) will be lost for future generations because feuding Christians today have been unable to sit down and talk through differences as scriptures demand.

Those differences were never insurmountable. Redeemer has always been on the same side in mission. There are no doctrinal issues. Redeemer is Lutheran through and through.

The dispute has been entirely about property, money, and power.

These subjects are covered by ELCA founding documents, from which SEPA's constitution has strayed. Founding documents forbid congregational property from conveyance without the consent of the congregation. Synod Assembly's power is limited in this regard by the Articles of Incorporation. Have church leaders read their governing documents before making decisions?

Even the courts, while taking a hands-off position, noted that if the law were applied Redeemer's position was well taken.

This should disturb all congregations. The court battles have cost them important rights promised to them when they joined the ELCA. Now they know that the law will not protect them, putting church members who attempt to follow their governing rules in jeopardy.

We are asking the Lutherans of SEPA Synod to seriously look at this situation without the prejudices of the last six years—for your own sake.

It is time that the representatives of SEPA Synod Council speak up for the congregations they represent. Their constitutional role is to provide checks and balances and to make sure that the rules, including the Articles of Incorporation, are followed.

Redeemer did not vote to close. Constitutionally no one has the power to vote us closed without our knowledge or participation.

As a member church we have a right to challenge this and other actions that took place AFTER the court ruling. We reserve that right until a fair forum can be provided.

Note: SEPA Synod Assembly never voted on our 2009 appeal. Check the record. We appealed Synodical Administration. The question presented by SEPA for vote had nothing to do with our appeal. It addressed SEPA's interest in taking our

property. The judge noticed this before he ruled that he had no jurisdiction.

The courts are telling us that it is up to us to enforce our own polity. Perhaps we as Lutherans should attempt Christian community without lawyers and courts—as is strongly recommended in the Bible.

Before you approve the sale of Redeemer property, assuming you will be asked, consider the following—not just for Redeemer but for the now nearly abandoned stretch of Philadelphia—five densely populated miles from North Philadelphia to Lafayette Hill.

You are squeezing out one of the most forward-looking and successful ministries with great potential to continue supporting SEPA — long after any income from the sale of land is gone and long after the personalities involved in the dispute are dust.

Here is what Redeemer has been doing for the last five years.

Redeemer Dealt with Changing Demographics

Changing demographics is a common excuse church managers present when analyzing ministry.

Demographics are always changing and were changing even in Jesus' day. It is the Church's job to deal with such change. Redeemer was doing so successfully.

A typical Sunday at Redeemer had people with ethnic roots from around the world.

Our first East African members joined in 1999. They grew steadily in participation and slowly in numbers. In 2006-2007, with the help of two Tanzanian pastors they organized a membership drive within their tight-knit community. Fifty East Africans joined in the first drive and more were

showing interest. The unique thing about their participation is that they wanted to be one with the entire congregation. They did not want separate worship. Another unique thing: the existing members of Redeemer embraced this.

Our cooperative ministry drafted a 20-page mission plan which was presented to Bishop Burkat on November 1, 2007. It was accompanied by a resolution to call one of the pastors who had helped grow our congregation. Bishop Burkat never responded.

Our rapid growth created an unusual challenge—assimilating many new members who spoke English as a third language. We were finding our way and had adequate leadership in doing so.

At the SEPA Synod Assembly in 2009, the trustees refused to recognize the new members of Redeemer and reported to the Assembly that we had only 13 members—not the 82 we had reported to Bishop Burkat two years before, complete with names and addresses.

Synod's actions were hurtful, but our community remained united and in touch with one another.

God is doing something new.

Redeemer Maintained A Worship Presence

Redeemer has been faithful as a worshipping community. For the first year of our exile, we met in homes. In the second year, we began visiting other congregations and borrowed space from a local theater once a month.

With all our worship materials confiscated, no pastor, and no synodical interest in helping, we turned to the internet.

A Lutheran pastor in Australia gave us permission to use his sermons. His gentle and consistent voice gave us continuity. We were to soon learn from his example!

We maintained our subscription to Word in Season (our only operating expense). We also linked members with the online Bible teacher. One member commented, “I feel like I know more about the Bible than I ever have.” Again, we learned from this example.

We also began holding weekly fellowship, often in a restaurant or one of our homes. We usually have a pastor and sometimes two pastors with us.

We remained active in East Falls culture.

God is doing something new.

Redeemer Takes Ministry Online

An online ministry was long-discussed at Redeemer. Our exile allowed us to move this to the top of our priorities.

We pioneered using the web as an evangelism tool—not just an online brochure or bulletin board.

We followed two basic tenets of the new world of interconnectedness:

1. Every organization has the power to be its own media company.
2. You reach more people by primarily addressing *others'* needs—not your own.

2x2virtualchurch.com will begin its fourth year of ministry on February 2, 2014. Our statistics, printed here, speak for themselves. We now have about 1500 viewers each week. (That alone makes us the biggest church in SEPA Synod!). In addition we have about 150 subscribers who receive our content daily by e-mail or social media. (2500 readers per

Months and Years

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2011		1	18	53	34	55	103	85	211	294	623	517	1,994
2012	785	912	879	806	1,022	873	1,081	1,119	1,103	1,379	1,496	1,581	13,036
2013	2,174	2,294	4,483	2,059	1,859	2,090	2,554	2,363	2,868	3,031	2,595	3,835	32,205
2014	2,791												2,791

Average per Day

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Overall
2011		0	1	2	1	2	3	3	7	9	21	17	6
2012	25	31	28	27	33	29	35	36	37	44	50	51	36
2013	70	82	145	69	60	70	82	76	96	98	87	124	88
2014	194												194

Our statistics as of January 15, 2014. As we end our third year of online ministry, we have reached more than 50,000 viewers and are on track to reach nearly 6000 per month (not counting subscribers). We reach more people than any other church in SEPA Synod. Lesson: It takes at least a dedicated year to get some traction, but the effort can change a congregation's ministry.

week places us among the largest churches in the ELCA).

Ping backs show that the issues we discussed have been referenced by seminaries. Our series on multicultural ministry was reposted. Two megachurches have contacted us about our social media strategy. A third featured our ministry on a podcast.

We have learned a great deal about these new tools. We want to share what we've learned.

Our content formula includes:

- Weekly object lessons geared to adult learners and geared to group settings. Most online object lesson sites address children.
- Weekly slideshows illustrating the lectionary theme.
- Series of articles on topics such as building social media ministry, multicultural ministry and programming ideas for small churches.
- We address church issues from the lay point of view, something very absent in the Church. A leading Church consultant wrote to us and told us our work is valuable and much needed.

We reached out and started to connect not only locally but with the world.



Redeemer's online ministry reaches around the world. Among the States, highest readership is from Pennsylvania, California, Ohio, Georgia, North Carolina—growing especially among southern states. Canada, Great Britain, France and Australia top our international presence.

Lesson: Geography is far less important as a measure of a congregation's viability.



The Martin's, missionaries to Sweden who read 2x2, visited while on furlough this May.

Our physical doors may have been locked for five years but our online church is open and occupied 24/7.

We played no tricks to gain followers or accumulate social proof. We simply provided content that we think will be useful to small churches.

Lesson 1: The internet can guide your ministry. It informs you of interests and needs and can help congregations allocate energy and resources. It can prepare you for shifting gears which is likely to be a characteristic of ministry moving forward in the 21st century.

Lesson 2: Internet ministry will take you places you never dreamed.

God is doing something new.

Redeemer Finds Mission Opportunity Worldwide

It took about a year to begin to gain significant traffic on our site, but soon fascinating mission opportunities began to find us.

In our first year we had only about 2000 visitors. Year 2, 13,000 visitors. Year 3, 32,000 visitors. 15 days into 2014, we already have 2700 visitors. These tallies do not include the 150 who receive our content daily via e-mail or social media. That's another 1000 every week. On January 15, 2014 we had our 50,000 visitor!

In our second year, we began to hear from ministries all over the world. We struck up a friendship with several, most notably mission efforts in Kenya, Pakistan, and northern Sweden.

We corresponded for about a year with each. Then with permission, introductions were made between missions. With a few weeks something astounding happened. The church in Pakistan that reads 2x2 sent a mission worker to Nairobi. A Nairobi pastor who reads 2x2 met with them and drove them to western Kenya to meet with a husband and wife mission team that works with orphans and follows 2x2. Meanwhile, a Swedish mission team visited us in Philadelphia when they were home on furlough. Then a pastor from Nigeria requested a contact in Kenya. They visited in Kenya.

The church in Pakistan wrote and thanked us for being "a bridge for mission."

Bro Silas told me that they arranged the prayer meetings for [mission representatives] we sent. I would like to thank you. You make a bridge for these prayer meetings and participated in Christ work.

And that led us to a ministry we never imagined.

God is doing something new.



Redeemer's online ministry connected with the struggling church in Pakistan. Our friendship was formed before the church bombings in September but has grown since. Here clothing sent by 2x2 readers in Michigan is distributed to orphans.

Redeemer Finds Itself Spearheading Social Action

In September 2013, we heard about the bombing of a church in Pakistan by Muslim terrorists. We sent an e-mail asking if our friends were OK. They responded that they were in hiding and in fear for their lives. There had been more bombs than were reported here and there was no way to know if the danger was past. We asked how we could help. They shared their fear that Muslim hospitals would not treat them well. They needed medical supplies and warm clothing for the orphans facing a harsh winter. Having no assets we weren't sure we could help. We looked for ELCA avenues. We found no mention in the Lutheran press and there are no companion synods for Pakistan. We checked Lutheran World Relief and saw no service to Pakistan. We posted the need on 2x2.

Readers in Michigan took the cause to heart. They gathered three large boxes of clothing. At first we were discouraged that commercial shippers wanted \$1500. Michigan 2x2 readers found a

business that ships all over the world. They helped get the boxes to Pakistan in time for Christmas. 2x2 in Philadelphia raised \$300 for shipping and sent a few hundred more for medical supplies. The Pakistani church leaders sent photos of the distribution of the items. This personal touch has inspired more interest in this type of mission. At this writing, we know where our mission has begun. We don't know where it will lead!

This mission effort has been totally driven by 2x2 readers.

And there are other examples. Our relationship with a mission in Kenya began when we sent a MP3 song for the orphaned children they work with to learn. When we saw the photos of the nearly finished house they were building to house the children, we sent a painting to hang on the walls.

Lesson 1: In the past, the language and cultural barriers necessitated churchwide and regional entities involvement for successful world mission. Today, individual congregations can make an impact as a result of their own initiative.

Lesson 2: The strength of the future church will be in the networks formed by congregations. They will be farther-reaching than the structured connections maintained by church hierarchy.

Lesson 3: Early adopters of technology are likely to have an advantage—even over churches with greater resources.

God is doing something new.

Redeemer Fought Legal Battles

Redeemer, the little church deemed by strangers to be too small to fulfill mission purpose, managed to find the resources to fight five years of legal battles. All churches should have paid attention to what these court battles mean to them. They have redefined every congregation's relationship with its regional body (Lutheran and non-Lutheran). Because most SEPA members looked the other way, all congregations have lost rights they will one day wish they had. Redeemer, at least, fought for them.

The court battles were costly to individual members. SEPA was content to allow volunteer lay members to bear the congregation's debt, while SEPA assumed the assets of the debt and attacked the volunteer members in court.

Redeemer has seen that those who sacrificed for their church are being made whole.

This is important to Redeemer as we want the people of this neighborhood to know that someone valued member sacrifices. We did not want to take advantage of actions people took in faith and in reliance on church law. This should be high in any church's priority. We have not seen this with SEPA.

We were able to do it by networking, building and contributing to relationships, and never giving up on what we believe.

God is doing something new.

Redeemer Ambassadors Gain Insight into Churchwide Problems

Redeemer wearied early of worshiping in hiding. After the first year, one of our members commented after worship, "I just don't understand why they want a church without us in it."

We decided to end our isolation.

While this was seen as threatening to SEPA, it was never intended as such. We visited for three reasons: to worship, learn and share. We took the time to study websites, read newsletters and learn about other ministries—something we wish others had done before making a multimillion dollar decision about our ministry.

Redeemer Ambassadors visited more than 50% of SEPA congregations to date. We learned a great deal about their common frustrations.

We see

- congregations being asked to change without having the tools, structure, or leadership to facilitate change.
 - a mindset that values clergy and property above mission.
 - dwindling finances and rising costs.
 - an aging adult presence and few children or youth.
 - an aging clergy.
 - a trend towards transient clergy—clergy that serve congregations for short periods of time with no long-term commitments (many with stronger ties to the synod than to the congregations they are serving).
 - a feeling of isolation, even desperation among clergy and laity alike.
 - most churches knowing very little about other churches in the synod.
- and last
- the people in the pew have no idea what their denomination has done in East Falls.

A huge problem seems to be that congregations have lost the ability to connect with their neighborhoods. This didn't happen overnight. It is the result of decades of inadequate mission leadership. The only solutions offered are to shove aging populations aside and either close the church or start new. (The latter tactic has not been working as well as reported.) This casts a pall on congregations. Low self-esteem hampers ministry.

Another problem is that small churches are measured by what they can contribute to the greater church and its structure and not to their neighborhoods.

We started thinking about how to change things.

God is doing something new.

VBS-Aid (vbsaid.com)

We outlined an approach to ministry that would have denominations, church agencies and seminaries working together with benefits to all.

The program is built on the decades-old concept of Vacation Church Schools as mission outreach.

VBS has suffered in recent years with fewer volunteers available to provide leadership.

Churches that still conduct a summer program have whittled them down to five-day programs with a total of about 10 hours of class-time and usually geared to the very young—better than nothing but without the impact of a more concentrated effort.

At the same time we see agencies looking for ways to engage with congregations.

We also see seminaries looking for candidates for church professions and youth looking for ways to serve.

VBS-Aid would provide well-trained teams of young people to work with congregations on two-week summer ministries that would engage the entire congregation in mission. The benefits are:

- Small churches have the help they need to reconnect with neighborhoods. They can use the help as long as they need while they rebuild their own leadership capabilities.
- Agencies have closer connections with supporting churches.
- The Church has a recruitment tool to interest young people in church professions.

2x2 has inquiries from churches in Minnesota and Florida with an interest in hosting this type of program. We'd love to pilot it in 2015 but could do a better job as partners.

God is doing something new in East Falls.

Redeemer has perhaps never been more viable.

Here's what a ministry in East Falls could look like.

A Redeemer Mission Plan (short version)

Worship

Redeemer still has the prime location for mission in East Falls.

Our people desperately want to worship in **our** church in **our** community and have a physical presence to complement our online presence.

We would continue to experiment with worship resources developed for the smallest churches and make them available on the web.

Redeemer had long-hosted the East Falls Children's Choir with music workshops in the summer. We also hosted many neighborhood groups. These ministries would be restored.

Education

Redeemer's educational building, which Redeemer was in the process of renovating in 2008, could be the home of a Christian Daycare program that would be yielding about \$6000 profit monthly while reaching local families. This would be building on Redeemer's historical calling and provide the bulk of an annual budget.

Evangelism Training

Redeemer could be holding hands-on workshops to teach any church interested in online evangelism how to conduct this type of ministry. This would be a no-fee service to other congregations.

Resources

Redeemer has created a significant cache of posts (close to 1000) that could be bundled into low-cost resources to provide additional income.

We truly believe that our ministry can thrive without basing it on a fickle offering plate.

VBS-Aid

Redeemer could be the hub for VBS-Aid, providing a place to train and house youth workers locally.

This program has significant income and mission potential.

This ministry should be far more valuable to SEPA than the fleeting fix from the sale of property.

But Redeemer needs other Lutherans to speak up.

The excuses given to justify the taking of our property (against church rules) are phony. Redeemer was self-supporting. Redeemer was growing. Redeemer was successfully reaching changing demographics.

Please think twice about approving any sale of property that was donated to provide a neighborhood with sacred space, is ideally located for mission where mission is viable, and where mission is sorely needed.

Redeemer never came to SEPA as adversaries. This label was put on us before there was ever any conversation with us. We have always seen ourselves as on the same side—dogged **advocates** for mission. Our ministry of the last six years (and 123 years) proves it.

God is doing something new in East Falls.

Lesson: When a conflict is defined by lawsuits, the Church has a hard time discerning God in anything.

SEPA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) should be proud of Redeemer.

Maintaining mission in East Falls is in the interest of all Lutherans. As it is, both Redeemer land and the Redeemer talent are being squandered.

*God is doing something new in East Falls.
And He's only just begun.*

Redeemer is not closed.
We are locked out of God's house.