

Nation & World



News throughout our nation and world relating to United Methodists of the Holston Conference

Once-embattled Maryland congregation closes church

By the Rev. Dean Snyder

A United Methodist congregation that was once one of the fastest growing in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference is closing because its leaders have decided that paying more than the property's value to bondholders would be poor stewardship.



UMNS photo courtesy of UMConnection

Church Closing: *Worshippers pray during a service at Gibbons-Resurrection United Methodist Church in Brandywine, Md.*

For Gibbons-Resurrection United Methodist Church in Brandywine, Md., the decision marks the end of seven years of struggle and controversy.

After the congregation's offer of \$2.75 million to settle its debt was turned down by Colonial Trust Co., the church's trustees decided to dissolve the congregation and surrender its buildings and land to the bondholders represented by Colonial.

"We offered the bondholders more than the real value of the building," said the Rev. Rodney Smothers, the church's pastor. "We are disappointed they turned down our offer, but we believe it would be poor stewardship to take on a debt that would drain our resources and thwart vital ministry for decades to come.

"We have asked the annual conference for help and received it again and again, but enough is enough," he said. "We will not ask the conference to support a larger loan than this."

Bishop Felton Edwin May, leader of the denomination's Washington Area, called the church's willingness to let go of its property and close its doors "Christ-like."

May said he was saddened that the congregation was unable to reach an agreement with bondholders. "There is probably no church in the nation that has received more support from its denomination than Gibbons-Resurrection," he said. "The conference has tried to help since 1995; however, I appreciate the congregation's decision not to ask for help it consid-

ers to be beyond the bounds of good stewardship."

The Baltimore-Washington Conference will respond to the congregation's decision to dissolve by strengthening efforts to minister to the region, the bishop said.

"In spite of the death of this church, we will not abandon the people in the community," he said. "I am convinced that God will do something new in this area, both for those former members of Gibbons-Resurrection interested in being part of something new and others in the surrounding communities."

Property Struggle

The Rev. Edwin DeLong, associate council director for congregational development, said the Board of Congregational Life was already planning to begin a new church in the area. A location within 10 miles of Brandywine was identified in 1999 as the possible location of a new multiethnic church plant, he said. "There is a growing multicultural population in the region, and the time for us to begin a new congregation is right now."

Smothers said Gibbons-Resurrection decided to close because it was unwilling to become involved in a bidding war with other potential buyers. "Our fair and reasonable efforts to resolve this issue have met resistance at every turn," he said. "We are a community and not a commodity, and we have collectively discerned that it is time for us to relinquish efforts to rescue this property."

"This has been an unusual and perplexing situation from the very beginning," said the Rev. Jim Knowles-Tuell, conference treasurer. "We have made every effort to find a solution to Gibbons' financial difficulties, which date back to at least 1995 when the church took on a massive building project and ran into one financial hurdle after another."

The church's saga of struggle included:

- ▶ A never-completed building project, begun in 1995, during which the first construction manager was fired, a lawsuit followed and total construction ended up costing more than twice the building's appraised value.

- ▶ Conference and denominational loans and grants of \$1.2 million between 1997 and 1999 to help the church, which was repeatedly unable to meet bond payments and

pay contractors, avoid insolvency.

- ▶ The abrupt departure from the denomination in 1999 of the pastor who had initiated the project, along with the majority of the church's members, leaving a remnant congregation of about 300 members with a debt of \$6 million.

Decisions by the conference loan board, finance council and denominational agencies after 1999 to invest additional funds, including nearly half-a-million dollars raised by a conferencewide appeal, in an effort to rescue the situation and save the congregation and its property.

"There is no question this has been a difficult moment in United Methodism's history," said Smothers, a nationally known expert in rescuing troubled churches, recruited in 2001 by May to help save Gibbons-Resurrection. "But we must not forget this: Neither the congregation, nor the conference, has anything to be ashamed about here," Smothers said. "During the past two and a half years, beginning with the leadership of Bishop (Forrest C.) Stith (interim pastor from 2000 to 2001), this congregation has done dynamic ministry under extremely adverse circumstances. It has paid its apportionments, contributed to special offerings, served its community and members and even managed to grow."

Gibbons United Methodist Church, later renamed Resurrection Prayer Worship Center of the United Methodist Church (which is still its legal incorporated name), became one of the fast-