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Motivated By Greed?

To The Editor:

If you believe the flyers that have been sent out by the Long Island City Alliance, and that are now being put up around the neighborhood, then this is the case. And if you visit their Web site, they will tell you that The Presbyterian Church of Astoria is motivated by greed, and that it is intent on destroying our neighborhood. Yet strangely, no "member" of this "alliance" is willing to give their name in public, and when they send letters to the editor (as they did to this publication), their names are "withheld upon request".

One might wonder why they are afraid to identify themselves if they are speaking the truth? And there is the problem: maybe they are not speaking the truth and they are embarrassed and ashamed by the lies they are telling and the tactics they are using. I am signing my name, and I, as "the greedy pastor", want to lay out the facts as they currently exist. (Why do I say "currently exist"? Because no hard, fast decisions have been made at this time.)

First, the church is going bankrupt, not because of my salary (after over 25 years as a pastor I am paid the minimum salary allowed by the presbytery-our diocese), but because the past three years have seen our fuel bills more than double (the fuel bill in 2003 was right at \$18,000, while the oil company tells us our fuel bill in the coming year will be more than \$40,000). On top of that, our facility is in need of over \$750,000 in repairs (one estimate says the repairs are more in the range of \$1.5 million). We run at a deficit of nearly \$2,000 a month, and we have less than \$40,000 in the bank. You can do the math and see that we are one crisis away from bankruptcy. Would it not be irresponsible for the board not to look at solutions and possible plans for the future?

Have we approached the historical community for help? Yes. Representatives from the New York Landmark Conservancy and the New York Historical Preservation's Sacred Sites have visited the church and found that there is no historical nor architectural uniqueness that makes the facility a priority site. In addition, they found that while it is a shame to lose the building, all that could be done by the congregation has been done. Then they add that this site is like many other small congregations in New York who find themselves struggling with aging and deteriorating facilities. So the church has approached historical societies. What about the [Greater] Astoria Historical Society? When I suggested to Bob Singleton, the president of the Astoria Historical Society (and the owner of the LICALLIANCE.org Web site that attacks the congregation as "rapists"), and asked if they would work with us to find funding, his verbal response was, "That is not our job." When I asked him what his "job" was, he said, "Our job is to save the building, it's your job to find the money." It is difficult to work with someone who feels it is his responsibility to attack you for not doing what he says he wants. I still say to Mr. Singleton, the Astoria Historical Society, and now the Long Island City Alliance, "If you want to save the buildings, find the money to repair them now and to maintain them in the future." Or do you want our facilities to become like the Astoria Terra Cotta Works on Vernon Boulevard - run down and vacant?

The anonymous letter writer accuses me, as the "greedy pastor" of hand selecting a new board composed of only new members. That is not true, either. Five of the members of our board have been on the board for over 4 years, and the board has four members who have belonged to the congregation for over 15 years, two who have been members for over 8 years, two who have belonged to the congregation for more than 3 years, and only one who has been a member for less than two years. On top of that, a committee, of which I am not a member, selects the nominees, and I am not even allowed to vote in the election of officers. Does that sound like a hand selected, "new board" to you?

What about the "free housing for the pastor"? Like all pastors I am provided housing by the congregation. While some congregations provide their pastor with a housing allowance, the Astoria congregation has elected to provide a house because it is less expensive for them to provide a house than it is for them to pay the rent required in this neighborhood. I pay FICA taxes on the "fair market value" of this "free house", and I never build any home equity. Again we find a mistruth and a deceit in what is written and promoted by this group.

On to the project. Is it a "low income housing project"? If it were, would it be wrong for a church to try to provide housing for the poorest in our community? And if that is what we were doing, how does that qualify as "greed" as our detractors write? Are they opposed to housing the poor? Is that why they do not want to share their names in public, because they are afraid to admit to this?

The reality is the proposed project would provide a new facility for the church that would be fully handicapped accessible (something that it currently is not, and cannot easily become); environmentally responsible; and constructed in such a way as to be usable as performance space and community meeting space (something we need in our community). In addition, it would offer after-school programs for children and youth, senior programs for residents in the facility and neighborhood; and possible medical space to serve the community. It would also provide as many as 90 units of affordable housing (a single person making as much as \$25,000 adjusted income would pay less than \$700 a month in rent) for seniors (those over the age of 55), and would also offer over 30 below ground parking spaces to ensure that the parking situation is improved. The front set back is 13 feet and will include trees and public benches, and the back will be set back 30 feet at the second floor level, with a rooftop garden to ensure that those living behind the facility will have sunlight and a better view than they now have. The stained glass windows that everyone loves will be saved and will be a focal point in the new facility. In short, trees will be added, a garden will be available, and seniors will have a safe and affordable place to live in the heart of Astoria.

The congregation and its leaders (not the pastor) want to serve the community and make it a better place for everyone to live, not just the few who are lucky enough to afford what we are becoming. Will it increase graffiti and crime? Let me ask you, "When was the last time you saw a 60-year-old graffiti artist? And how many 70-year-old drug dealers do you know?"

It seems to me that Mr. Singleton and the members of his Long Island City Alliance are using personal attacks and scare tactics to try to get their way. They do not want to engage in open conversation and debate or they would quit withholding their names and denying that they are a part of this defamatory campaign against a small congregation that is trying to be a responsible part of the community. Their apparent goal appears to be to scare a neighborhood and spread rumors, and at best half-truths about the congregation that has served this community for over 150 years, and wishes to continue for the next 150 years.

As the proud pastor of the Astoria Presbyterian Church, I am more than willing to openly discuss these issues and plans with anyone who is interested, but I cannot and will not reply to anonymous letters and flyers that attack the congregation in general and me personally. Eleanor Roosevelt once observed, "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss current events, and small minds make personal attacks." How about if we all work towards greatness and begin to openly work towards ideas that can improve and serve our community, rather than hiding in the shadows of anonymity and deceit?

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Technical information on the LIC ALLIANCE Web site is available from Olinger or the Gazette.