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# Fighting to Save a 'Real Country Church'

By Janis Johnson

Washington Post Staff Writer

The 125-year-old Bethel United Methodist Church that stands at a rural crossroads near Dale City may be bulldozed by its 126th birthday, the victim of old age and new times.

And then again, the church may still be standing next fall if the historic preservationists and sentimentalists in the old Bethel community win over the pragmatists.

The fate of the one-room, white frame church at the intersection of Smoketown and Davis Ford Roads about two miles east of Int. 95 will be decided April 12 at a congregational meeting.

At issue is whether to move the building a few hundred feet onto property where a new church will be constructed or do nothing and thus allow the old church to be demolished by a developer who has bought its property for a road.

One of the practical problems facing church leaders is that moving the church would cost \$7,500 plus repair expenses, money that is sorely needed for the new church building fund. The congregation has outgrown the old facilities.

Two years ago church leaders decided moving the old church was a cost they could not bear.

But Janna Leepson, whose family has lived in the area for generations and who was raised in the congregation although she is no longer active, learned as a member of the Prince William County Historical Commission of dissent to the old church's destruction.

"I have yet to run across anybody with qualms about saving the church until you talk dollars and cents," said the Rev. Fred Parish, Bethel's pastor. His 210-member congregation with a fairly even sprinkling of young, middle-age and

older members is "literally digging into their pockets" for money for the new church building fund.

"If we raise \$45,000 I think we can borrow the rest, but even that will tax us. It would mean something like \$1,500-a-month in mortgage payments. We currently pay \$800, and that is hard to come by," said Mr. Parish.

Evelyn Dean Ognowski, a member of the church building committee, said she has tried futilely to convince the committee to keep the old church. "Whenever I brought it up, I was told

there wasn't a chance," she said.

"I have heard people say they seek out Bethel because it is old. It's a real country church with real country people. To me, the new church will never be the same," said Mrs. Ognowski, whose family joined the church in 1932 when she was 9 years old.

In Civil War years, the church was used as a hospital, although no one is sure for which side. After the war, the slave balcony was removed. It has been a community center throughout

its history, used for political stumping, fiddlers, cake walks, 4H and Boy Scout programs. The Muriel Humphrey school for retarded children located in the old Bethel schoolhouse across the highway has held classes in the old church.

"My grandmother (who is 88) has watched the changes," Leepson said. "The older citizens have been pushed out because of the development (primarily Dale City) and now they want to take the church, too. We are fighting to retain our heritage."

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