



By Steve Mawyer—Potomac News

Church member Christine Rettman is one of those opposed to abandoning the 100-year-old Gainesville United Methodist Church to make way for a larger church building, as proposed by the Methodist board.

PRESSURE

Century-old church on development's precipice

by GARY CRAIG
of the Potomac News

Members of the Gainesville United Methodist Church will gather in the confines of the small white clapboard building Sunday.

Unlike past gatherings, when members worshipped, they will decide whether to spare the century-old structure from the path of western Prince William County's expanding suburbs.

The congregation will vote Sunday on whether to abandon the church, located at the intersection of John Marshall Highway and Fallerher Road, in favor of a new, larger structure better able to handle the area's residential growth.

The debate features many of the questions often prompted by the county's rapid development: Can growth be accommodated without the destruction of historical treasures? Is bigger necessarily better?

—What is unusual this time is that the dispute has raised its head in a religious sanctuary, an atypical setting for arguments spurred by the county's unyielding urbanization.

Some members of the Gainesville Methodist congregation, about 100 strong, charge that history is being selfishly sacrificed so that money can be made. The five-acre church site is prime property, sure to sell for a pretty penny, they say.

The regional Methodist hierarchy "is too anxious to get the five acres of land and sell it and make big bucks," said Mrs. Christine Rettman, who has attended the church for most of her 63 years. Many of her relatives are buried in the church cemetery and she fears that the graveyard might be destroyed if the land is developed.

"I think we can serve God being right there as well as we can serve him being some-

where in a 300 to 400 capacity church," she said.

Capacity is the issue at the Gainesville church, according to Bob McAden, the district superintendent of the United Methodist Church's Arlington District.

"The building is just not an adequate structure for worship and Christian service in a growing community," McAden said.

McAden denied that the Methodist district will make money from a land sale of the Gainesville church site. The church would keep that money and use it for purchasing land and building a new church, he said.

But, Mrs. Rettman said, the district is applying pressure to force the Gainesville church to relocate. The district helps churches pay for expansion or new buildings and also has to approve construction. She said the some churchgoers worry that any futur-

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building at their church site will be vetoed by the Methodist conference.

Any proposed expansion at Gainesville would get a fair review from the Methodist district, McAden said. But any financial help for the building would be unlikely, he said.

"I don't see them getting any financial assistance from the conference ... because the conference doesn't think that's a good place to be," he said.

Land surrounding the church will likely transform into commercial and office space in the years ahead, McAden said.

"A church does better in a residential area than in a commercial area," he said. The district would like to see the church relocate within a three-mile radius of its current site, he said.

The religious rift has triggered some division in the congregation,

Mrs. Rettman said.

"There are some that I know that would like to relocate," she said. "Most of them say, 'If we can't get any help here, why shouldn't we relocate.'"

The congregation at Sudley United Methodist Church, which borders the Manassas National Battlefield Park on Sudley Road, is facing similar questions. The Methodist district also thinks that church is in need of more space, thus, needs to relocate.

The Methodist district is also considering selling the Buckland Church, a structure built in the 1850s that is now home to the "Mustard Seed," a thrift store sponsored by the district.

Some members of the Sudley congregation don't disagree with the need for expansion.

The church, which has a congregation of 374, "is bursting at the seams for places for children," said Mary Ferguson, an Evergreen resident who five years ago co-au-

thored with her sister, Elizabeth Johnson, and E.R. Connor the church history in the book, "History In A Horseshoe Curve."

But, she said, the church is trying to expand its facilities on its present site, which housed a hospital during the Civil War. The present church, built in 1923, is the third one there, she said.

"We've had pressure on us from the district to relocate, but as a group we've fought it," she said.

As some Sudley churchgoers tell it, the Methodist district might have an easier time moving Bull Run Mountain than it will if it tries to uproot the Sudley congregation.

"We would have the biggest fight you ever saw," said Betty Duley, a Catharpin resident who is a member of the congregation. "The people that go to our church are very historically minded."

"Everybody doesn't abandon their historic churches that are functioning in order to make big new churches," she said.

Community Happenings