

Mission Madness

An Analysis of SEPA Synod's Mission Strategy

This document is being presented to member churches of Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod (ELCA) in an effort to analyze its current mission strategy. It will examine the history of one particular congregation—Redeemer Lutheran Church. This congregation is currently (2010) engaged in litigation revolving around the ownership of the congregation's property on the corner of Midvale Avenue and Conrad Street in the East Falls neighborhood of Philadelphia.

The conflict has a history which dates to the early days of the Synod which was established in 1986-1988 with the merger of three national church bodies to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Pivotal to the history is the repeated invocation and misuse of a synod constitutional statute which states.

S13.24. If any congregation of this synod is disbanded, or if the members of a congregation agree that it is no longer possible for it to function as such, or if it is the opinion of the Synod Council that the membership of a congregation has become so scattered or so diminished in numbers as to make it impractical for such congregation to fulfill the purposes for which it was organized or that it is necessary for this synod to protect the congregation's property from waste and deterioration, the Synod Council, itself or through trustees appointed by it, may take charge and control of the property of the congregation to hold, manage, and convey the same on behalf of this synod. The congregation shall have the right to appeal the decision to the Synod Assembly.

The church has even coined a term for this statute. It calls it Involuntary Synodical Administration (ISA). These words are not found in the constitution and have given the statute an authority never intended. This is evidenced by other language in the Synod's founding documents. This statute should never be read out of total context of the documents which define the Lutheran Church.

There are critical foundational promises made to congregations — every Lutheran congregation, large or small. These are found in the Synod's Articles of Incorporation and they read:

In the performance of its functions, this corporation [South-eastern Pa. Synod] shall not act as the agent of, or otherwise obligate the income or assets of the ELCA, any congregation of the ELCA or any other synod of the ELCA without the express authorization of such entity.

And going back to the Synod Constitution, the very next statute in the Synod Constitution reads:

S13.25. This synod may temporarily assume administration of a congregation upon its request or with its concurrence.

Concurrence is an important concept to Lutherans. It is important to Redeemer and it should be important to every Lutheran congregation. It is part of our heritage and it is a key reason that Redeemer will take this conflict to the highest courts.

And let this be said: This conflict is unnecessary and could have been avoided by Synod leadership respecting lay members and assisting them in their ministry as was intended. Given this respect, this conflict would have never happened and Redeemer would be continuing to grow as it had demonstrated it could grow. Cooperation in ministry is the only reason any congregation belongs to a denomination.

Redeemer, like most SEPA Synod congregations, joined the new Synod in the late 1980s, expecting to be in relation with other Lutherans. Redeemer has never been afforded this relationship and has been rebuffed by Synod from its very first need, which was in 1996, when the pastor who had served the congregation since before the formation of the ELCA retired.

At this time, in 1996-1997, Synod did not work with the congregation to find a new minister. It immediately set the wheels in motion for Involuntary Synodical Administration. For ten years, Redeemer's needs were ignored until the next bishop came to office and almost immediately, without consulting with the congregation, determined that Redeemer should be closed. Details and a comparison of both events follow.

A BASIC ASSUMPTION

The powers of ISA are given to the Synod with the assumption that the Synod, pooling the resources of many congregations, is financially sound or at least more sound than the congregations it targets for Involuntary Synodical Administration. In fact, this is not the case.

SEPA Synod Assembly has faced regular deficits and in 2009 Synod Assembly, the same people who voted to approve the bishop's action in seizing Redeemer's property also approved a deficit budget.

Synod Council Minutes of 2005 reveal that the Synod was then within \$75,000 of depleting every resource available to it. This means that Redeemer, despite its size was richer than the Synod! The first rumors of potential actions against Redeemer were heard in June 2006. The minutes report that there was a salary freeze. Shortly afterward, the move to new offices and a construction project had to be halted when the overall economy made budget concerns even worse.

Ten years before, when Bishop Almquist confiscated Redeemer's bank account, ISA was also the stated reason. After one year, Bishop Almquist removed the status of Involuntary Synodical Administration. Another year went by before, after repeated requests from Redeemer, Synod returned Redeemer's money. Shortly afterward an appeal letter was sent to all congregations asking for help in plugging a deficit of almost the exact amount of money Synod had returned to Redeemer. Redeemer had provided an involuntary interest-free loan to the Synod.

SUGGESTION to SYNOD ASSEMBLY

Synod Assembly should forbid the invocation of Involuntary Synodical Administration when the Synod itself is operating a deficit budget. It just looks bad.

THE USE OF ISA AS A MISSION STRATEGY

It has been suggested that ISA is a mission concept. The concept is accompanied by a lot of words which justify and camouflage the callousness of such an approach to ministry. One pastor wrote that it represented the Resurrection, suggesting that out of the death of one congregation, another congregation would be reborn. There seems to be no realization that to achieve the "death" of a congregation, cruel and questionable tactics are put to use. Synod waited ten years without assisting this congregation, planning for it die a natural death. This is why Bishop Burkat is stuck in her image of white and black Redeemer. Recognizing the new members would mean the church didn't die as planned. When that didn't happen and the church grew, they reverted to something more akin to murder. All of Synod's testimony at Synod Assembly was years old. It's witnesses, including Bishop Almquist and Rev. Ericsson had little or nothing to do with the congregation since 2000. Likening such tactics to Jesus' sacrifice is offensive.

There is nothing biblical about this strategy. There is no Christian concern or caring for our community. No double-talk can hide that. No church leader has faced more difficult challenges than Peter or Paul and nowhere in their scriptural saga do either of the founding fathers of the church call for eviction of the faithful in order to attract new, better (more likeable or more Christian or more subservient?) people. Such a concept flies in the face of the basic tenants of our faith . . . grace, redemption, atonement, justice, reconciliation.

The flowery words surrounding this cruel concept include “allow the congregation a six-month “period of mourning.” In Redeemer’s experience, this mourning period was nothing other than abandonment.

At Redeemer, we are experiencing the reality of this “mission strategy.” In reality the Synod is neglecting people in all their physical and spiritual needs at every stage of life. In our pad-locked church there has been no care for the young, the sick, the old or the grieving. The Sacraments have not been offered. Our young have not been taught, Our sick have not been visited. (The Word, however, has been faithfully delivered by dedicated lay people with the help of anonymous clergy.)

As our sanctuary was locked this Christmas (Silent Night, but not Holy Night) not one Lutheran congregation, not one trustee, not one pastor, showed any compassion for Redeemer or its members. Good people who relied on their church as the foundation of their lives have been abandoned. No shepherd has gone out its way to care for this church. (One nondenominational church in the Northeast read about our situation and reached out, offering their sanctuary on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.) Our congregants’ faith has been severely tried. No ceremonious reopening will take these experiences from us or our community. There is good reason why this

“mission strategy” can not be found in the Bible; it is wholly unChristian.

That it is unChristian is precisely the reason it is so difficult to pull off. Redeemer will continue to challenge and we ask that other caring Lutherans put aside the rhetoric and start asking questions. This “mission strategy” needs serious review. Endangered churches are relying on other congregations and their leaders to give proper review—not passive and safe agreement with the authorities.

Perhaps, SEPA Assembly members thought that their vote in May 2009 would put an end to this difficult situation. This is not the end; it is the beginning. Success here will allow Synod to move on to the next target

Redeemer probably has more experience with this concept than any congregation in the ELCA. The following analysis will compare the 1997-1998 attempt to invoke ISA by Bishop Almquist and the 2008 attempt by Bishop Burkat. You will see that there is a pattern which all congregations should study and prepare for. This misguided concept clearly was not thought through at the formation of the ELCA, probably because its current usage was never foreseen. It was provided as a method of closing churches when there were only a handful of members left. This was not the case at Redeemer where Synod actually worked to discourage membership and leadership to create the conditions they could then cite in order to seize assets. Perhaps Synod Assembly assumed that Synod was working with the congregation. Not true.

Any new ELCA governments must visit this issue as its current interpretation promises a never-ending legal challenge which will diminish mission resources of congregations as well as synods. Synod Assembly, having failed to properly review and decide, has now turned the battle over assets into

the public arena — a terrible witness for our denomination. This is the Lutheran Church at its worst.

There will be long-term ramifications. While congregations are supposed to exist with an interdependent and mutual respect in regards to ministry and mission, holding this threat of closure over member congregations will promote an undesirable and unintended “hierarchical” mindset. Scripture and conscience will play little role. This is not conjecture; it is already being seen. Fear and intimidation have been key tools in this mismanagement of synodical authority. Deceit and cunning have been hallmarks of leadership style. The true purpose of the mission relationship between individual congregations and the synod is being lost.

This rest of this document will describe in detail Redeemer’s extensive experience with this concept. It describes what actually happens when the well intended words of the church constitution are actually set in motion and when power, pride, and greed are as much motivators as the limited conditions described in the constitutions.

ROUGH HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

SEPA Synod first targeted Redeemer for its assets in 1997, roughly a year after the pastor who had served the congregation during the foundational years of the ELCA retired. It was also within a few years of the congregation, which had always been self-supporting, receiving a \$300,000 endowment. Redeemer was NEVER afforded the opportunity to use the new ELCA’s call system. A second attempt to seize Redeemer’s property and assets is currently underway having started in 2006, shortly after the election of Bishop Burkat and before there was any interaction between the synod, its new bishop and this growing congregation.

Here is a comparison of the methodology used in invoking Involuntary Synodical Administration.

STEP 1

Synod will seek to leave congregations without professional leadership in hopes that lay talents will be insufficient to carry on. Synod will make sure no clergy bears any responsibility for failure.

ATTEMPT A:

In 1996, Redeemer's pastor of 11 years retired. Rev. Robert Matthias, who was serving on Synod staff, was called as interim pastor for a term call of 18 months.

Three months into the 18-month term call, Bishop Almquist came to the church's annual meeting and asked for Matthias to be released from his contract. (He gave 30 days notice.) The reason cited was that the Bishop Almquist had work for him in Bucks County. Redeemer was given no assistance in replacing him nor was the congregation offered any compensation for the broken contract.

A year passed with minimal leadership of supply pastors. Meanwhile, instead of looking for professional leadership for the congregation, Synod staff member, Rev. Sue Ericsson, met with the congregation council and, without the knowledge or any input from the congregation, encouraged them to resign so that the Synod could take control of the church assets. The documents from this era show that synod had gone so far as to schedule a closing service before the congregation was ever told of Synod's intent. Before this was ever discussed with the congregation, before any vote was taken, the Synod had set the date of March 4, 1998, as the congregation's final service.

This action was implemented using deceit. The Annual Congregational Meeting, usually held the last Sunday in February

was announced for the last week in January. Calling this meeting as the usual Annual Meeting allowed the synod to use this format without notifying the congregation of the true purpose of the meeting. If they had called a separate meeting to discuss closure, they would have had to give two weeks notice and given written notice of the purpose of the meeting. This was a way of blind-siding the congregation.

Three members of Synod Council (Gordon Simmons, former pastor Robert Matthias and Rodney Kopp) showed up at the annual meeting. The meeting was conducted as any congregational meeting until it came time for the presentation of the budget. At this point, the church council presented a resolution to close (which the congregation later learned had been drafted by synod.) This was the first the congregation had heard that this was under consideration. The congregation wisely voted to table the resolution for congregational study. At this point the church council members presented letters of resignation. Robert Matthias stepped forward and collected them (synod refused to share the letters with the congregation) and announced that the meeting was over. Chaos ensued and while the congregation talked with Simmons and Kopp, Matthias went to the church office and took the congregation's financial records. The three visiting pastors went immediately to a prescheduled Synod Council meeting where they invoked Involuntary Synodical Administration.

An interesting aside: During this time a family new to the neighborhood began attending Redeemer and expressed a desire to join. They were Tanzanian. A Synod representative visited them and discouraged them from joining asking them why they would want to join our little church. They joined anyway, their children were baptized and the entire family became the cornerstone of a new ministry—which the Synod now refuses to recognize.

ATTEMPT B:

In 2007, Redeemer was actively engaged in developing a new and exciting ministry using the services of Pastor Timothy Muse. This ministry was initiated by Redeemer's lay leadership and Synod was fully informed. In fact, Pastor Muse was a member of Synod Council and became dean of this region while serving our congregation. Pastor Muse was the called mission developer to Epiphany congregation whose building, about two miles from Redeemer, had been condemned due to termite damage. Redeemer and Pastor Muse enjoyed a good relationship while sharing ministry with Epiphany and were working to unite the two congregations in a paced and methodical way. Shortly after a meeting with Redeemer to plan the upcoming Advent/Christmas season, Redeemer leaders received an email announcing that Pastor Muse was resigning and leaving in ten days (constitution requires 30 days notice). Redeemer learned that the Bishop had met privately with Pastor Muse and the president of Epiphany to discuss this. Our president contacted the bishop's office and was told that she couldn't deal with Redeemer until she was done with Epiphany. Redeemer was never part of the discussion but Redeemer continued to host Epiphany for six additional months (their period of mourning) with no compensation and no pastor. During this time we regrouped and began an outreach ministry to Tanzanians. We already had a significant Tanzanian membership, so this was a natural outreach. We met with immediate success and began working with two Tanzanian ministers. We studied our situation carefully and drafted a comprehensive and realistic ministry plan with input from the supply pastors serving us. We presented this plan and our resolution to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya to Bishop Burkat, who never responded to either our plan or our call request. (This plan was reviewed by independent business experts and given high praise.)

In February, with no consultation with congregational leaders, Bishop Burkat called a congregational meeting, again to discuss closure, a subject which did not interest Redeemer as we had within the last year accepted 49 new members. The congregation voted that they did not wish to meet for this purpose and informed the bishop in writing that there would be no meeting. On February 24, Bishop Burkat came to Redeemer accompanied by a group of some ten people and attempted to force entry into our building. Redeemer representatives, following the wishes of the congregation, refused to allow the meeting. The Bishop and her party left but congregational members encountered the Synod's lawyer and a locksmith waiting for members to leave so that they could change all locks on the church without the congregation's knowledge. The confrontation ended peacefully after the synod's lawyer talked with Redeemer's lawyer, but it was later spread throughout the Synod that Redeemer had tried to have the bishop arrested. This was never the case.

Two days later, Synod met privately with Pastor Mutashobya, discouraging him from being involved with Redeemer. He never returned to Redeemer after this meeting with the Rev. Patricia Davenport.

STEP 2

With professional leadership out of the way, refuse to recognize lay leadership. Publicly discredit their volunteer efforts. Identify individuals to blame. This will intimidate weaker members of the congregation into submission.

ATTEMPT A

In 1998, Bishop Almquist, through staff member Sue Ericsson, secretly encouraged the existing council to resign in preparation for Synod's intent to invoke ISA. Three refused to go along with the plan and reorganized council with the help of friendly clergy. This is the probable reason Synod refused

to share the council's letters of resignation with the congregation. They knew the entire council had not resigned according to plan and that their subsequent actions were improper. Bishop Almquist refused to recognize the properly elected council, referring to it as a "leadership group."

Synod representatives visited Redeemer's bank and withdrew \$90,000 without the knowledge or permission of the congregation. Congregational leaders attempted to contact the bishop and synod for 90 days after this raid. Synod failed to respond until the congregation engaged a lawyer. Bishop Almquist complained bitterly that a lawyer was engaged and after some time even refused to meet with congregation if the lawyer was present. Redeemer pointed out that one of the named trustees was Robert Blank, a lawyer, and it was only fair that Redeemer have legal representation.

ATTEMPT B

In 2008, after ten years of synod neglect, Bishop Burkat and her trustees painted an unfair portrait of Redeemer's lay leadership, ignoring the unusual circumstances the congregation was facing after Epiphany congregation, without consultation with Redeemer but with consultation with Synod, broke its 14-month covenant. The two congregations had been working to unite. Epiphany had given Redeemer no forewarning that they were considering closure. In its presentation to Synod Assembly, Synod quoted partial statistics and facts from this period when Redeemer's Council was working to join with Epiphany's council and attempted to make it look as if Redeemer had inadequate leadership. It failed to inform the voting assembly that the councils were operating together under the covenant. The records from this union were never quoted or referenced.

Less than two months after Epiphany held its final service,

Bishop Burkat asked Synod Council to place Redeemer under ISA, but Redeemer was not informed of this action for more than four months. In December, prior to Epiphany closing, Bishop Burkat had promised a meeting with Redeemer “within three to five months: This promise was never kept. Meanwhile, the “trustees” came to visit with Redeemer but told them only that they were “fact finders” They did not identify themselves as trustees and did not inform the congregation of Synod Council’s actions involving ISA. The fact finders thanked Redeemer representatives for their candor, all the while lying about who they were and why they were there.

At this meeting, Redeemer’s leaders shared their strategy for recovery from the experience with Epiphany, which in subsequent months they followed successfully. Trustees and bishop met with eight out of ten council members in November 2007, but persisted in representing the church as having only two council members, which was NEVER the case. At this meeting, Bishop Burkat promised the congregation that they would enjoy working with the Rev. Patricia Davenport. This promise was broken as Redeemer was never given this opportunity.

Synod did not work with Redeemer’s leadership. The bishop called congregational meetings without consulting council leadership. Redeemer’s constitution states that only the Congregation Council, its pastor, or a petition of members may call a congregational meeting. Redeemer’s leadership insisted that the leadership of the congregation be respected and that congregational meetings be called in cooperation with council. Synod had no intention of respecting the congregation or its leadership. **We learned that Synod works with the Congregation Council as long as it goes along with Synod wishes. If that doesn’t work, they insist on Congregational Meetings. If this doesn’t work ignore every one. This is demoralizing to all lay leadership.**

SERIOUS PROBLEM

A congregation council in SEPA is respected only when it is following the wishes of the Synod. If the people who elect them differ, they are expected to follow Synod's wishes, not the congregation's.

STEP 3

**Invoke the constitution when it works for you.
Ignore the constitution when it doesn't.**

We have already detailed the fickle following of the church constitutions, but let's review the actual constitutional stipulation that Synod uses to invoke what they call "involuntary synodical administration."

The constitution says that Synod's may invoke ISA under very specific circumstances. It does not define these circumstances. **With no definition every congregation could be made subject to this constitutional provision.**

Briefly, these circumstance are:

A congregation's desire to close

A membership which is scattered or diminished

Or the protection of church property from waste

This criteria was not met in Redeemer's situation as was proven repeatedly.

Obviously, the congregation had no desire to close.

The congregation had grown significantly since Bishop Almquist's time.

All but two members live within five miles of the church.

Redeemer's property has been lovingly cared for and the congregation is in the midst of renovating its kitchen and fellowship hall according to the plan presented to Bishop Burkat in November 2007.

There is an assumption that the statistics used to invoke ISA will be current. There may also be an assumption that Synod had assisted the congregation in improving its ministry. Neither was the case for Redeemer. In Synod's recent attempt to invoke ISA, the "trustees" dwelt on old statistics, facts taken out of context and ignored the current statistics and status of ministry. While they were reporting that revenues were down in 2006 after Epiphany closed, by 2009, revenues had rebounded and were stronger than they had been in a decade. Redeemer couldn't help but notice that the gaggle of witnesses lined up at the microphones on the floor of Synod Assembly were all addressing things that had happened many years prior (and then under circumstances not fully detailed). **Synod presented no current statistics.**

Furthermore, Redeemer's excellent ministry, primarily the result of lay efforts, was totally ignored, although there were ample statistics to represent this. (See reports on web site.)

STEP 4

Refuse to work with the congregation.

ATTEMPT A: We have already detailed how Bishop Almquist ignored the congregation for more than 90 days after it visited its bank and how he refused to meet with the congregation with its legal council.

ATTEMPT B: Redeemer desperately wanted to be heard. We wrote letters monthly for 14 months. Every letter was ignored. Calls to the dean, the mission developer and the synod were routinely not returned from 2006 on. One member approached a member of Synod Council and tried to talk with him. He came back with the report that he couldn't get a word in and the bottom line was they had no intention of negotiating with Redeemer.

We read in the constitution that a resolution to withdraw from the ELCA mandates 90 days of negotiation. We followed the constitution, called for a congregational meeting and unanimously resolved to withdraw from the ELCA and promptly forwarded the resolution to the bishop. We wanted 90 days of negotiation more than withdrawal.

In response, Synod sent the congregation a letter telling us we could not withdraw. It informed us that Redeemer was officially terminated and had no rights in the ELCA. This was Redeemer's first notice that the congregation was "officially terminated." The letter added that we would have no vote at the upcoming Synod Assembly, although it had already accepted our registration and payments. That's one way to deal with congregations who disagree — terminate them!

Bishop Burkat even ignored Bishop Hanson's written directive to work together to resolve differences.

STEP 5

Allow the constitutional right of appeal but manipulate the process, the venue and the guidelines of the appeal.

When Redeemer was first informed of the status of ISA, almost five months after it was actually imposed, the congregation immediately informed the Bishop of its intent to appeal.

Synod clearly intended to carry out the decision while waiting for the appeal, which is hardly fair. While we would spend months waiting for opportunity to appeal they intended to lock the church, keep us from worship, fellowship and meeting, and discourage the congregation. The bishop even came to the church with a locksmith. It was after this that Redeemer filed a law suit to keep the Synod from taking the property before we could appeal.

Synod actually filed an emergency injunction requesting the courts to allow them to confiscate the property immediately, but the courts refused to hear their request.

Redeemer asked regularly during the next few months about the guidelines for the appeal process. Our requests were ignored. Meanwhile, Synod attempted to invalidate our right to appeal, questioning again our right to have a lawyer, questioning who had the right to request the appeal (the council or the congregation), questioning the quorum...one objection after another. They were denying our right to appeal right up until the week before Synod Assembly when we were suddenly notified that the Appeal was scheduled. We were still not provided with guidelines or procedures.

This questioning of our right to appeal continued to the next Synod Assembly. We continued to ask for information and guidelines. Synod continued to ignore our requests and again, one week before the Assembly, we were notified that we would have only 15 minutes to present our appeal and the synod would follow. We would not be allowed to question or comment on anything the synod presented. We were told that there would be 10 minutes of “discussion.” We were not told that discussion meant that we could line witnesses up at the microphone, which is what Synod did. We naively believed that discussion meant discussion—questions and answers on our presentation, honest give and take.

The night before the appeal, after the first day of Synod Assembly, we were told that the discussion would be extended by 10 minutes. We didn’t know that meant they were scheduling more “witnesses” to line up at the microphones. Having no notice, we could not use the extra minutes. In effect, Redeemer had 16 minutes and Synod took 35 unanswered minutes. The process was a true kangaroo court, an embarrassment to Lutherans who believe in justice.

Synod's "dirty tricks" included a last minute change to the wording of the question presented without notice to Redeemer, switching the meaning of a yes vote to a no vote. But oddly, in their maneuvers they also took out of the wording of the question any reference to Redeemer's appeal. In the end, the appeal was NEVER VOTED ON!

This experience points to severe flaws in the ELCA and Synod constitutions, which beg to be addressed. **The Synod Assembly cannot arbitrate disputes with the bishop when they involve the acquisition of assets which will benefit the arbitrating body. There must be a reconciliation committee or ombudsman that is not prejudiced in favor of the bishop.**

EFFECTS of INVOLUNTARY SYNODICAL ADMINISTRATION

Ideally, one would think that ISA would be used to help congregations over a rough patch, not to acquire property. This has not been Redeemer's experience. In both 1997 and currently, the effects of ISA are devastating and cause long-term damage. Redeemer recovered from the 1997 incident and Redeemer is prepared to recover once again, but the damages cannot be denied and other churches need to know that their vote to approve such behavior by their leaders causes real problems and real pain.

- In 1998, Bishop Almquist released the congregation from ISA after a year. The year of ISA had damaged the congregation. The interference with Redeemer's Congregation Council caused these members to lose face in the community and about xx30 left (the council who cooperated with synod, their families and friends). By the end of the year there were only 13 adult members. It took the synod an additional year to return the congregation's money.

- In 2007, Synod invoked ISA which now had more than 70 members and was growing quickly with the help of the Pastor they had requested to call. The law suits intimidated many members. After all, many were not United States citizens and were trying to establish themselves in a new country. One can hardly blame them for hiding from the lawsuits, especially when synod made it clear that they would sue members personally for representing their congregation. None left, but many stayed away waiting for resolution, coming only to events not held on Sunday, when Synod was likely to show up. There are no positives for the congregations. The negatives include:

- In 1998, when the synod was working secretly with the council, the council was making sure they got a piece of the pie before turning the money over to synod. A new laptop computer for one, a complete top of the line computer system for another, a set of tools to another, a custom gravestone to another. **This did not happen in with the current Congregation Council!**

- ISA discourages stewardship. No one will give significant gifts or endowments when the Synod is seen as standing in the wings with its hand out. Redeemer had just recovered from this stigma in 2007 and had received its first estate gift in ten years. Then, here we go again. Interestingly, one long-time member who saw the congregation through the first synod crisis, left the congregation shortly after it resolved. She said, she just wanted a church with a pastor. At her death two years ago she left a large part of her sizeable estate to her new church. For the last two years, Redeemer's leadership developed and implemented a stewardship initiative which was beginning to show results.

- ISA gives the congregation a stigma that makes it very difficult to attract professional leadership through Synod

channels. Supply pastors have shared that other pastors chortle when they reveal they are serving Redeemer. Nevertheless, Redeemer was always able to forge good relationships with the pastors we found on our own, but after Synod's refusal to honor our call to Pastor Mutashobya, we know that we will never be able to choose and call a pastor through the Lutheran church.

- The stigma of ISA affects the church's image in the community and among other Lutheran churches. It also affects the congregational dynamics, morale and self-esteem. It is a terrible, terrible thing and its use should be seriously discouraged.

INVOKING ISA IS USING CHURCH RULE BY INTIMIDATION AND FEAR

The overwhelming vote of Synod Assembly to allow Synod to take a congregation's property (whether or not it is constitutionally permitted) has already created an aura of fear. Speak out and your church might be next. Evidence of this is the number of Synod Assembly members who spoke privately with Redeemer's representatives after the Synod Assembly vote and expressed concern . . . but they didn't vote their concern. The camera panning across the Synod Assembly floor for the public vote would have recorded their objections and targeted them.

LONG TERM RAMIFICATIONS

Synod revealed during the last court proceeding that Redeemer is the first of six congregations they are targeting for Involuntary Synodical Administration. Synod is creating a Permanent Class System within the ELCA.

As Synod collects deeds and assets of smaller churches it is creating a subservient constituency. Larger churches will "own" the congregations of the church's whose property is

held by the Synod. Borderline churches will fear to speak out. Their property will be the next to be seized by the Synod.

This is a serious situation which needs to be addressed by clergy and lay delegates. Redeemer's fate is now in the hands of the courts (although there is nothing stopping the next Synod Assembly from correcting their mistake). We have confidence that a review of the case will reverse the ruling. We may lose, but at least we have used every resource in our power to fight for what we believe in.

WHAT IF . . .

What if Synod leadership had approved Redeemer's request to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya? What if they would have worked with Redeemer's leadership? What if they had shared ideas or resources in helping grow ministry? What if Synod leadership had responded to any of Redeemer's numerous attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully?

(View the many letters we wrote on the web site—
redeemereastfalls.com)

It is never too late to employ true Mission Tactics. Redeemer respectfully requests the good member churches of SEPA Synod to review what is going on and ask if this is the way they want their church to be known. If you study the history of this conflict, you will see that Redeemer offered peaceful solutions which provided Synod with the ability to check and monitor progress. But Ministry was not their goal.

SEPA congregations can correct the direction its church is going at its next Synod Assembly. Hold your Synod Council and leadership accountable.