

Lay It on the Laity

When things go well in a church, credit the clergy. When things go wrong, lay it on the laity.

The most discouraging aspect of the current confrontation of Redeemer Lutheran Church and SEPA Synod is the patronizing and disrespectful treatment of lay leaders.

In the Lutheran tradition, we teach lay people to use their time and talents for the church. We sing to our children that their light should shine and they should not let anyone blow it out. We teach our confirmands that *they* are the church. We read parables about stewardship and use of talents and resources. But the reality in SEPA Synod is that the laity are not expected to use their talents except under the direction and control of clergy—few of whom are business moguls and many who have interests of their own.

Laity who do the bidding of clergy are celebrated. Those that have honest disagreements are discredited, labeled, and in the case of Redeemer, silenced by “termination.” This is a terrible witness to our church and our communities and a most atrocious model to our children. They have a front row seat!

This seems to have created a synod which operates without serious questions being asked by either clergy or laity. The prevailing attitude, “we have to support the leaders we elect,” disregards the lessons of democracy and of history. Good government, secular or religious, relies on the input and careful review of a well-conscienced and well-informed people. The Lutheran Church has its roots in the honest questioning of authority. This need will never disappear and is even more important when leadership works to silence members.

At the 2009 SEPA Synod Assembly, the delegates approved a significant deficit budget. The 2010 budget deficit is nearly \$300,000. How is this budget to be met? Synod dismisses the budget deficit with a glib reference to funding coming from a Mission Fund (Other People’s Money—OPM?). The same body approving this deficit also approved seizing the assets of a member congregation. This was approved after Synod leadership led a campaign attacking the congregation and its lay leaders and even suing members individually after they followed the congregation’s wishes and opposed seizure of its property. The congregation had been paying its own way, using its own resources to shape its own ministry, entirely faithful to the Lutheran tradition. Redeemer had no plans to tap any other funds except the use of its own resources to fund its own ministry.

Most Lutheran congregational constitutions give to the laity the burden for operating the congregation. The decisions regarding worship, property, leadership, approval of the pastor, etc, are the responsibilities of the lay people. Of course, there is supposed to be a respectful relationship with clergy. Lay people yearn for that. But when clergy are absent from leadership, as they have been at Redeemer for years (by Synod design), lay people have a right to use the same skills they use in their family and

professional lives for the work of the Lord. In fact, these words are repeated weekly in many churches during the offertory prayer—we give our selves, our time and our possessions. If this is not true, all Synod need do is refuse to provide pastoral leadership and churches will close left and right. And this is Redeemer’s experience.

Bishop Burkat’s characterization of Redeemer’s Christian community from her first encounter was offensive. At her first and only meeting with church council on November 1, 2007, she opened the meeting by labeling Redeemer as “adversarial.” She had never met most of the people at this meeting and had never worked with any of them. She then picked out one Redeemer member, the only one who had been an adult member of Redeemer ten years before when Bishop Almquist caused trouble, and said “especially you.”

When a congregation is so labeled from the start, how should it respond? Redeemer responded by trying harder, by cooperating and communicating even more. The bishop asked for Redeemer’s records. She got them. Months of silence followed. Redeemer attempted to communicate. Phone calls were not returned. Redeemer wrote letters — lots of them. They contained numerous suggestions for peaceful resolution. They were totally ignored. They are posted on the web site (redeemereastfalls.com).

Redeemer wrote to Bishop Hanson who responded to Redeemer and to the bishop, urging all to work together. Redeemer continued to call and write letters. Bishop Burkat responded to none of them and the marching orders to the rest of synod were apparent. Redeemer was being shunned. The regional dean did not return calls. The mission developer left one telephone message that she had nothing to report. One Redeemer council member approached a Synod Council member to try to break through the silence. He reported that he was subjected to a tirade and could say nothing. Synod Council had no intention of negotiating with Redeemer, was the disillusioning summary of his report.

The trustees reported to Synod Assembly that they attempted to work with Redeemer—that they had met, visited and worshiped with the congregation. Untrue! Synod did not even inform Redeemer of its decision to place the congregation under Synodical Administration for more than four months! All efforts to resolve the conflict were one-sided and initiated by Redeemer. (Redeemer has published documentation of its efforts to work together. Compare these reports to Synod’s.) There was only one meeting with three of the four trustees and no Synod representative worshiped at Redeemer until long after the letter announcing closure was issued. No trustee or visited our Wednesday prayer meetings or our Saturday Praise services. They made no attempt to collect current data. How do lay people respond when their leaders are operating dishonestly?

That November 1, 2007, meeting was the only meeting ever held with Redeemer's church council. Redeemer left the meeting feeling that progress had been made. Redeemer presented a thorough plan which business experts had reviewed and praised. Redeemer members had worked on the ministry plan for months and it deserved consideration. Redeemer was forging a multicultural ministry which did not separate cultures but worked to unite them into one worshiping community. This was a different ministry model than other churches which opened their doors to ethnic groups to worship separately. The East Africans representing several countries were full members of Redeemer. Steps had been taken to make sure they were represented in church government. Our East African members recognized the advantages. Their culture was honored but the children were comfortably assimilating to the ways of their new community. Redeemer wanted to share its successes.

Although Synod has persistently and falsely represented Redeemer's leadership as consisting of only two members, this one meeting with the bishop was attended by eight of ten council members, one supply pastor, two members and the church organizer. Early in the meeting, Bishop Burkat went around the table and asked how long each had been a member. She was clearly surprised to learn that most present at the meeting had been members of Redeemer for many years. It became clear that Synod wanted to separate the new East African members from English-speaking members in order to make the congregation look diminished to justify synodical administration. But many of the East Africans had already been at Redeemer for a decade. But there was to be no reasoning, no changing of the bishop's predetermined course.

Redeemer's ministry plan included an up-to-date membership analysis. Bishop Burkat looked at the membership list and commented. "A lot of these names look African." She went on to say, "White Redeemer must be allowed to die. Black Redeemer . . . we can put them anywhere." All were offended. How should a congregation respond when Synod attempts to divide the church along racial lines? Our older members lives of service were valueless and our newer members potential wasn't good enough.

At this same meeting, Redeemer presented a congregational resolution to call Pastor Festo Mutashobya, who was present at the meeting, who was fully familiar with our ministry plan, who had already worked with Redeemer for many months and who had agreed to the proposed compensation. Bishop Burkat promised to review the plan and further promised that Redeemer could begin working with Rev. Patricia Davenport. Four months went by with no communication from the bishop. She then wrote to the council and the congregation at the same time declaring the church to be closed. No discussion. No congregational vote. Just an attempt to humiliate local church leadership and create the scattered and diminished conditions it needed to justify actions it had already taken.

This was the pivotal moment in the confrontation. If ministry had been the objective, the bishop would have approved the call of an ordained Lutheran minister trained at Philadelphia Seminary and a member of her graduating class. She would have

allowed a regularized call, or if uncertain, she would have approved a term call for review in a year or so. Redeemer would have accepted either. Had this happened, there would have been no law suits, no padlocked churches, and Synod and our Lord would have a unique multicultural ministry.

But ministry was not the objective. Remember, Synod's looming deficit budget needs to be addressed. The objective was to gain the congregation's property and assets. It was to become clear that nothing was going to stand in the way of that objective, not even the Gospel.

Bishop Burkat's next interaction with Redeemer was to write to the congregation announcing a meeting to plan a closing service. The congregation had already notified her of its intent to appeal and there was no reason for such a meeting. She also chose the day Redeemer had already scheduled its Annual Meeting at an earlier time. The congregation notified the bishop's office that it did not wish to meet on that day for that purpose. Bishop Burkat ignored the communication and came to Redeemer on the afternoon of February 24, 2008. She brought with her about ten people, including a lawyer and locksmith. Two members (the same two the Synod is currently suing) met the party and repeated that the congregation would not be meeting. Eventually, the party left. The two members remained and found the locksmith van waiting behind the church with synod's lawyer in the front seat.

This type of behavior reflects badly on the bishop and her office but the blame was deflected onto the laity. Redeemer members have already been labeled adversarial, so when members object to a locksmith locking the congregation out of its building, instead of Synod outrage at the behavior of its leaders, the gossip is "Redeemer tried to have the bishop arrested." Lay it on the laity.

Redeemer members are actually quite capable. Redeemer membership includes several entrepreneurs and professional business people. Almost all adults have college degrees and there are a few advanced degrees. Nearly half of our congregation has a clergy member in the immediate family. Redeemer members are not difficult but are knowledgeable Lutherans. Redeemer created a plan and faithfully followed it, making adjustments as necessary because of the law suit, and the plan has proven to be effective. Unlike Synod, Redeemer never calculated that Other People's Money would pay our way.

Synod attempted to block Redeemer at every turn. They discouraged clergy from working with us. They influenced the 25-year tenant (Ken Crest) to leave, leaving us with little income. Meanwhile they sued us. The plan was apparently to burden the lay leaders and squeeze the congregation out monetarily. But Redeemer pooled its talent and met the challenge head on.

At the lowest point in our nation's recession, Redeemer showed the same ministry plan it provided to the bishop to a lender and had no trouble obtaining a one-year bridge loan. This type of loan has a high interest rate, but Redeemer had no current

credit history to qualify for traditional loans. The plan was to use the one-year loan to upgrade the property and find a new tenant and to pay a Pastor to grow our ministry. The loan would help the congregation qualify for cheaper rates and refinance at a much lower rate. The loan was low risk, only about 35% LTV on the annex building alone—that's one third LTV on one third of Redeemer's property. The lender was impressed with Redeemer's plan and shared that they approve only 10% of loan applications.

Redeemer was on the road to success. A new lease was signed which would yield significantly more than what Ken-Crest had been paying. An independent daycare and afterschool program would be managed by members at competitive rental rates. Because they are members, the congregation could work with them and witness to the community, a benefit we did not have with Ken Crest, which although a Lutheran agency accepted government money and could not witness. Redeemer had operated its own daycare program for many years in a similar manner. It, too, was managed by church members. Redeemer was pleased to restore this ministry and this mission and it also provided a significant improvement in Redeemer's finances. Furthermore, the plan is to double the rental payment within two years as the program grows and occupies more space. This, along with other stewardship efforts, would provide more than enough income to meet Redeemer's obligations and budget. Synod evicted this tenant along with the congregation in September 2009.

In addition, Redeemer used member talents to create an income stream which was also a ministry to the immigrant community and evangelism tool. As these outreaches develop Redeemer expects to pay all obligations within three to five years with its own money. Synod has hindered Redeemer's efforts to help itself while *they* rely on OPM to fund *their* budget.

You may hear rumors from Synod about outrageous financial circumstances, but they, like so many other Synod rumors, are not true. Redeemer, if left to forge its own ministry, can cover its own obligations—but not with the church padlocked, tenants evicted and assets seized by Synod. Synod talks about being appalled by Redeemer's actions. Redeemer is equally appalled by Synod's behavior.

Synod has damaged Redeemer. It has tested members' faith. Some stand up to the threats; others wait, hoping for resolution. All pray. During the last two years,

Redeemer members have sponsored and followed through with many prayer services, days of fasting, Bible study and individual prayer. Redeemer would welcome a sudden intervention from on high to resolve this dispute but recognize that God is on his own timetable. Redeemer will continue to be faithful despite adversity and trust that prayers will guide the congregation's actions.

One clergyman spoke at Synod Assembly after Redeemer made its appeal. He said that if Redeemer were his congregation, he would have had all of his members present at the Assembly. Sounds high and mighty. He missed some points. Redeemer had no pastor to rally members and lay members were being sued personally — *before* the appeal. Given the Synod Assembly vote, Redeemer doubts many clergy would have dared follow through on his empty boast. Redeemer can only wonder how effective this clergyman's high-sounding strategy would have been had he and his people faced the same circumstances—if he had been privately encouraged to abandon his flock while lay leaders were targeted with law suits and subjected to the public humiliation which was SEPA's implementation of the appeal process. Lay it on the laity.

Members of SEPA Synod, you can help end this conflict. You can request an honest, thorough and independent review of this situation. Failure to find a solution within the church will leave the final resolution to the courts . . . and that may bring even more trouble to Synod and the ELCA. Synod can still find a solution on its own.

(Perhaps, Synod thinks it already settled this. The resolution voted on by Synod Assembly, which had its wording changed at the last minute by Synod, does not mention Redeemer's Appeal. There was a vote, but the Appeal was never voted on!)

Delegates should carefully examine Synod's budget. Request an accounting! Synod Assembly representatives should also ask for verification of how the significant deficit budget they passed will be funded. If they find that closing churches and seizing assets or by the more politically correct term (doublespeak) we have heard, "the closed church tithe," is part of the solution, they should ask "which churches?" Targeted churches should know if by approving a deficit budget they are sealing their fate. And some honest accounting of the costs of closing churches in this manner should be provided. It may very well be cheaper to help churches succeed rather than forcing them to close with litigation.