

American churches are facing more and more obstacles

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5342>

Last year, the National League of Cities said that municipal governments were likely to fall short of funding between \$56 billion and \$83 billion by the end of this year. Just recently, Reuters reported that the city of Central Falls, Rhode Island, (population 19,000) filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy with an outstanding debt of \$21 million.

Cities across the country are facing similar economic problems, albeit not so severe. However, my concern has been for some time that the need for funding has been and will in the future affect how cities will treat the churches within their borders.

I'm not saying that all cities are becoming anti-church, though I have read some accounts that were unquestionably just that. It is beyond question, though, that attitudes toward churches over the last decade or so have taken a turn for the worse, and not just in city government.

I read an article recently about a Catholic church that had applied for a zoning permit that would allow them to build a larger building on its existing site in order to double its seating capacity.

In this case, the city is hearing from critics in the community that are attempting to scuttle the project, claiming that the church will be too large, that it doesn't fit into the architecture of the community, and that it will place a burden on city infrastructure.

The city has hired an attorney to help them deal with the case, stating the special circumstances that must be taken into account when dealing with a church. It is not clear to be the case in this example, but the fact that a city is taking extra precautions reinforces the value of the Religious Land Use Act (RLIUPA), and that other churches that have fought and won zoning cases (such as was the case with Rocky Mountain Christian Church in Boulder County, Colorado).

What I found very disturbing about this particular case were the comments that followed the article, because they demonstrate a severe anti-church bias, if not outright hatred or contempt for churches.

One of the comments about the church was, "We need more medical facilities, not private organized religious mega churches that don't pay taxes on the money they take in by preaching fear tactics to the weak people who don't know any better and give their hard earned money to the churches and then have to use taxpayer funded entitlements from welfare, Medicaid, food stamps etc., because they have given their money to these rich outfits (sic)"

Another comment: "I think it is shameful that the Catholic church wants to build such an expensive church when the money could be used to stock food banks and help the disadvantaged. This is disgraceful. A more modest and less expensive church could be easily built that's big

enough to accommodate the people in the parish. There is NO reason to have such an extravagant church.”

If these comments don't demonstrate bias toward the church and a misunderstanding of what the church is for, perhaps this one will - “The reason they can afford to build this church is they pay no taxes, do not pay for water, and pay reduced utilities. This is a neighborhood and they will destroy our quality of life with this monster of a church. Divide the parish up and send some on their way...”

When you take into consideration the financial stresses placed on city government, the bias toward churches, and the fact that so many cities are rewriting their zoning codes in a way that will exclude churches from the same rights as others, it becomes clear that churches in America are facing a real challenge to their survival.

For those of us who understand what churches are and the value that our churches are to our communities, we readily see the disinformation, the misinformation, and the ignorance of these three comments. But for others who aren't Christians, who don't understand the Christian-Judeo roots of this country, and who have been indoctrinated by others with anti-Christian ideas, these comments probably seem quite well-reasoned and acceptable.

This is why it is so critical for churches in America to preserve a place for themselves in American communities. Few city leaders are going to stand up for churches that won't stand up for themselves, so it is important for churches to be involved in their city's planning efforts. That may mean being determined enough and well-funded enough to go as far as it takes in the legal system to insure that place in community. In some respects, American churches are finding themselves in a similar situation as Israel - fighting simply for the right to exist. Giving up isn't an option.

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