

Church that stood up for gay rights faces closure

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) The small stack of envelopes that arrives at Grace Community United Church of Christ in St. Paul, Minn., each day are filled with good will and small bills -- ones, fives and tens mostly.

The donations lift the spirit, said Rev. Oliver White, but they likely won't be enough to save the church.

"Technically, we should be packing," White said.

On June 1, the church will likely default on a high-interest loan and lose its building, unless it can come up with \$175,000 to buy the loan out.

As of Wednesday (May 16), Grace Community was about \$170,000 short, but its plight has gained considerable attention within and without the UCC, thanks to one of several reasons the predominantly African-American church may lose its home.

In 2005, White, took a stand at the UCC's General Synod in opposition to many of his congregants and backed support for same-sex marriage. His side won the day at the conference, with about 80 percent of the vote, but White came home to a congregation divided over his belief that gay couples deserve the UCC's blessing. Immediately, he began to watch its numbers dwindle.

The congregation, founded in 1990 in a relatively poor African-American neighborhood, grew smaller and poorer, and two years later took out a high-interest \$150,000 loan, which now has an even higher interest rate of 23 percent.

When the church was growing financially desperate earlier this spring, a predominantly gay UCC megachurch in Dallas delivered a \$15,000 check to help with the interest payments.

The donation, hand-delivered, gave the remaining members of the congregation hope.

But an incident earlier this spring in which a gunman drove by the church firing shots and screaming "die faggots," shook the congregation. There were no physical injuries, and it inspired them to fight harder to survive.

In hindsight, White said, signing the loan was a terrible mistake, and buying it out is the key to the church's survival. White is asking 200,000 people to donate \$1 each, working his church networks and with rally.com, an online fundraising tool that has gleaned more than \$700 for Grace Community.

If the goal isn't met, according to the church's statement on rally.com, the pastor's "decision to take a stand in favor of gay marriage rights will have cost him and his small congregation their spiritual home."

But Grace Community had serious fiscal needs even before White took his stand. And even White acknowledges that the church could have done a better job of managing its money.

Race also plays a role in the church's plight. To many other churches within the generally progressive UCC, the question of same-sex marriage was easily settled in the affirmative. But African-American churches have generally been more resistant, making White's stance particularly brave in the eyes of many gay rights proponents -- such as those at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas -- who realized the stakes for Grace Church were particularly high.

Race also plays into the relationship between White's church and the denomination, and its efforts to keep Grace Community afloat. The UCC's Minnesota Conference counts 135 churches, including one predominantly Native American church and one African-American church -- Grace Community.

"It's of great interest to us to have ministry in both those communities," said Conference Minister Karen Smith Sellers, citing years of financial assistance to Grace Community from the conference and individual UCC churches, an estimated total of more than \$100,000.

In 2007, the conference, with agreement from Grace Community, decided to diminish its financial support, Sellers said. "We released ourselves from a

relationship that began to look unhealthy," she said.

White attributes only good intentions to the state conference, which, he said, rightfully pointed out that Grace Community's finances could have been better kept and more transparent. But despite the conference's willingness to help, their concerns seemed patronizing to some parishioners, he said.

"I don't think they meant it to be racist but it came off that way," said White, who met with Sellers on Thursday to discuss the church's future.

"It could be God has other plans for this congregation," Sellers said before the meeting.

In the meantime, the donations continue to dribble in, from people of all races, gay and straight alike. White continues to pray for that "miracle check" that will solve his problem.