

March 28, 2004

Dear friends,

It has been an extremely difficult few months. For the first time in a couple of years, we have run into ***intense opposition*** to our church and our ministry here in Ann Arbor. It began in December when we hosted a neighborhood meeting to share about our building project. One of the neighbors who came literally yelled at us for an hour and a half, making slanderous and untrue allegations. It was deeply disturbing to all who attended. Then, our local neighborhood association called a meeting to discuss our building project. When we tried to attend, we were informed that we were not allowed to come – even though we are due-paying members of the association – and then we were excluded from obtaining the member list in order to contact those same neighbors to provide factual information regarding our project. Instead, we sent students door-to-door to over 200 neighbors, inviting them to come to any of several open houses we hosted. Hardly anyone came. One night, an elderly couple came and was very nice and spoke very encouragingly about the project. They then wrote a letter to the city, twisting our words and distorting our answers to their questions. If this sounds unbelievable to you, we agree. We've been totally stunned by the ferocity of opposition. One exciting thing that did happen in the midst of this, though, was that the Ann Arbor News contacted us and said they were doing an article on our project and asked if we'd like to comment. Thankfully, the article came out pretty favorable toward us.

In January, we went before the city's ***planning commission*** for formal site plan approval of our project. The meeting went extremely poorly. Neighbors had put pressure on the school superintendent that caused him to back out at the last second from supporting our project. (You may remember that an elementary school is behind us, and they had agreed to let us share their parking lot in exchange for their use of our auditorium for school events.) The superintendent wrote a letter just hours before the meeting, saying that he could not support the project at this time. He promised his own principal that this was just temporary – until they could sign a formal contract with us – but has since backed out due to pressure from our neighbor's lawyer. Unfortunately, we had agreed not to present our arguments at the planning commission meeting because of the superintendent's concerns. At the meeting, fourteen Ann Arbor residents stood before the commission and shared how bad our project would be for the neighborhood. It was stunning, as they continually shared false information (and that's a kind way to word it). In the end, the planning commissioners scoffed at our project and voted to table it for a future time. A few days later, one of the neighbors wrote a follow-up letter to the city, accusing us of using our current building illegally and asking the city to shut down our current use. The city then launched an investigation on our current ministry.

So where are we now? We are convinced more than ever that this campus needs a biblical, evangelical presence on the central campus area. Six thousand freshmen come to U of M every year and are not allowed to have cars their first year. ***There needs to be a vibrant church within walking distance of campus.*** Meanwhile, the scheduling department at U of M scheduled us to be out of our auditorium at a time that would make a second service nearly impossible. We negotiated and got a reprieve for this semester, but they were clear that they could not promise our current use forever.

In counsel with GCM, we decided that we needed to seek legal counsel for the future of our project. God has blessed us with two excellent lawyers. One is a Christian who came to Christ as a student and is convinced that our church is desperately needed in our city. The other is Jewish and extremely well-connected with the mayor and city council. He is convinced and has been told by others that we are facing discrimination based on our evangelical Christian beliefs, and he's excited about our case because he believes that discrimination is wrong, no matter who it's against. We will, unfortunately, incur some additional costs to the project for lawyer fees, but we realize that this project is at a crossroads, and we need to proceed with wisdom and counsel.

So how are we doing? It has been a very trying time emotionally the last few months. It is very difficult to be spoken against and slandered with very little recourse to share the truth. But God is faithful. The students are responding with tremendous passion and faith. Our attendance is holding strong at around 600. In an eight-day period in February, we saw 18 professions of faith. One young Muslim gal was baptized and shared with tears how she had come to put her faith in a God of love and grace through the death of Christ. Over spring break, we had students go to Mexico, Amsterdam, and Jamaica on mission trips, as well as 30 more who went to Florida for a trip based on prayer and Bible study (not the normal college Florida spring break trip).

John 1:5 says, ***"The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."*** (NLT) Though we have felt so many times throughout the years that the darkness is trying to extinguish our church and our ministry here, we serve a faithful God. We are continuing to stand on His promises. "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

Thank you for your continued prayers and financial contributions. We covet your prayers now more than ever. If you have any questions on the status of the project, feel free to call me personally. It is an honor to be teamed up with you for God's glory.

Sincerely,

Steve Hayes, Pastor
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