

**If you care about the preservation of our neighborhood, it is time to stand up and be counted.**

Dear neighbors:

For a long time, First United Methodist Church (FUMC) has been chipping away at its surrounding historic neighborhood by tearing down houses and replacing them with parking lots, at least one indoor basketball court, and expansive facilities.

In the late 1990s, FUMC set out on another ambitious plan for growth, which included tearing down or removing six houses to make way for the current McKinney Christian Ministry Center. However, by that point, the neighbors had reached their breaking point and spoke out against this continuing practice and even managed to rally significant opposition to the plan within the Church itself.

What ensued was a several-year public relations battle between FUMC and its surrounding neighborhood, much of which was fought in the pages of the Williamson County Sun. Ultimately, FUMC, under the direction of Reverend Tim Bruster, decided to seek a compromise with the surrounding neighborhood, which was agreed to in late 2002. In these discussions, Reverend Bruster and the Facility Planning Committee represented the Church and the neighborhood was represented by Renee Hanson (on behalf of the Heart of Georgetown Neighborhood Association), Farley and Ann Snell (Farley was a former City Council Member and former pastor of FUMC), representatives of the Georgetown Heritage Society, and Robert Phipps.

The resulting handshake agreement was that the neighborhood would not object to the Church growing along University Avenue and the Church would never again tear down or remove any house south of 13<sup>th</sup> Street. The neighbors withdrew their objections, the houses were lost, and the Church built the McKinney Christian Ministry Center, which is only one of the new buildings intended to be built on that property.

Now the Church not only wants to break its agreement and intrude further into the neighborhood, but also wants to tear down a more than fifty-year-old house immediately next to a state historic district (1302 Ash Street, which would be turned into yet another parking lot), and close portions of 13<sup>th</sup> Street, which would be turned over to the Church. Virtually all of the Church's plan will ultimately be subject to City approval, and we have confirmed that the Church has been telling City Staff that the neighborhood has been informed of this proposal and that everyone is fine with the plan. Nothing is further than the truth. Most of the immediate neighbors are vehemently opposed to this proposal.

This is being presented by the Church as a solution to the major parking problems that it causes, and as the gift of a tiny park for the neighborhood children. That is a sideshow. FUMC plans to build yet another huge facility on their existing property, which should more than swamp the 90 parking places that they expect to gain through this fiasco.

In addition, there are very few young children in the immediate neighborhood who might benefit from the planned playscape. If this is a gift to the neighborhood, it is nothing more than a “Trojan Horse”.

Beyond that, representatives of the Church have already told us that they recognize that they will need to add a satellite campus within less than a decade, so all that they are really talking about doing is further scarring the neighborhood just to buy them a more few years before they need to divide their congregation (very little of which actually lives in the surrounding neighborhood).

Also infuriating is the fact that they have no need to do this, as they have a variety of other solutions to the parking issues already available to them. First of all, Southwestern University has offered their parking lots to the Church from which FUMC can run a shuttle service. This was dismissed by church representatives as being “too inconvenient”. They could also just convert their existing greenbelt to parking, which appears to be more than half as big as the large city parking lot near Grace Church and much bigger than the land that they clear by tearing down the house in question. This is particularly true when you include their “Prayer Maze”.

In addition, instead of building another huge building on the current site, thus further exacerbating the parking issues, they could simply redeploy all of that construction money to what they are ultimately going to need to do anyway, which is to build their satellite church outside of town.

Reverend Steve Langford is correct about one thing. There is a major parking issue, particularly on Sundays, when you would be unable to get a fire truck down the streets during much of the day. However, for FUMC to present this as the solution to that problem is specious at best, when they are planning to make the parking issue worse than ever as soon as they build their next huge facility on the current site.

**With the encouragement of Georgetown’s city staff, FUMC is holding a meeting at 6:30 pm on Thursday, March 10<sup>th</sup> in their sanctuary building. They will use the event to roll out and promote this plan to church members and neighbors. City staff members will be in attendance, with one of their goals being to gauge the level of neighborhood opposition to this plan. If no one raises their voice in opposition, it will send the message that the Church is right, and that everyone in the neighborhood is OK with both this plan and the continued intrusion of this Church into the neighborhood. If you truly care about our neighborhood, we need you to both show up next Thursday and actually speak out in opposition to the plan. We hope to see everyone there.**