

January 17, 2024 | Waynesboro, Virginia | *a newsletter supplement*

Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery pays \$718,000 debt in act toward reparative justice

*The “mountain of debt” was incurred by a Black church
during presbytery-directed building transfer in the early 2000s.*

By Patrice Gaines. **Ryan Landino** walked into the Lovejoy United Presbyterian Church in Wood River, Illinois, knowing that some 100 nervous people were waiting there – and another 81 online – to hear what he had to say. Landino, presbytery leader of the Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery, would explain how 17 years ago their presbytery orchestrated an arrangement that benefitted two White churches while leaving a Black church burdened with substantial debt for years.

Later, Landino would write of the action taken at the meeting: “On August 24, 2023, the presbytery made the decision to respond courageously in one of the boldest acts of reparative justice in our presbytery’s history.”



Landino.

Using PowerPoint, Landino presented a step-by-step explanation of how the presbytery transferred a building to Third without disclosing the real condition of the building or the scope of needed repairs and did not treat Third “as an equal” partner in the agreement. Landino spent weeks combing through minutes, emails and financial documents. John Knox Presbyterian Church, one of the White churches involved, assisted by providing some documents as well. The documents went back to 2005 and told the following story.

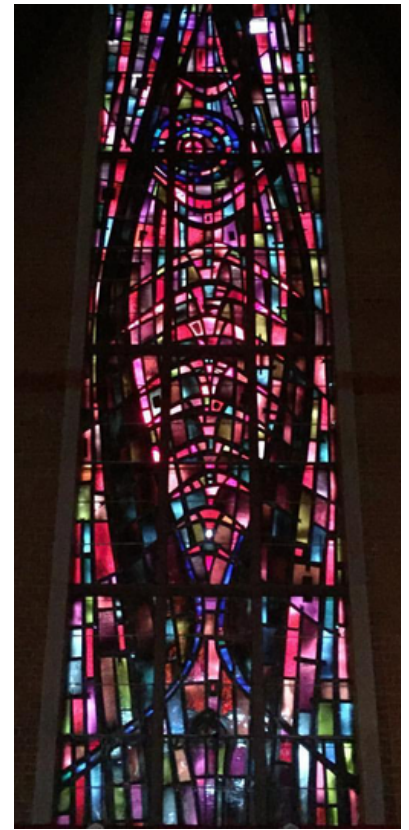
Membership at New Providence Presbyterian Church had declined, their pastor was retiring, and the church could not afford to make the necessary repairs to the building. A plan was formed in which New Providence would dissolve, and its members join the John Knox church; the building would then be surrendered to the Presbytery. Before an agreement was finalized, though, Third Presbyterian Church expressed its need for a larger building and parking lot. After further discussion, New Providence was permitted to sell their building to Third church. The formal agreement also stated that upon the sale of Third’s original building (the church planned to sell its building to a Baptist church), \$190,000 of the money from that sale would be put in the presbytery’s escrow to cover anticipated repairs to the New Providence building, Third’s new home. Presbytery records explicitly mention all three congregations in this arrangement.

“But here things get really, really kinda wonky,” said Landino. The proposal stated that any money from the sale of Third over the \$190,000 would go to John Knox, the White church. “I had to reread this part a whole bunch of times,” Landino said. Continued

Giddings-Lovejoy, continued

Subsequent documents show that Third's name was dropped from the proposed agreement, basically leaving them without any say-so or consideration and making the agreement only between John Knox and New Providence. (In Landino's research, no records were found showing that John Knox received any proceeds from the sale.) In the end, Third received an empty building in such bad condition that the church had to soon take out a loan to make necessary renovations.

There were emails from Portis, who was and remains the pastor of Third, questioning the arrangement, but presbytery leadership tells him not to worry and insinuates this is not a final agreement. Meanwhile, the congregation of Third moved into the New Providence building and discovered it was in worse shape than had been conveyed. During his research, Landino found a note from Portis reporting that a week after Third took possession of the building, it rained in the sanctuary because the roof was leaking. "It cost us \$300,000 to renovate just to move in," said Portis, who is also an engineer. "[The presbytery] allowed people to take chairs, communion ware, everything (from New Providence). They gutted the building," Portis said. "We are a small church and in a poor community. I know something was wrong, but I was just trying to pay off this debt. It really started to impact us during the pandemic."



Stained glass window,
Third Presbyterian Church

It was an inquiry by Portis about the possibility of getting the loans paid off or forgiven that prompted the presbytery leader to begin to look deeper into the circumstances that created the debt. "[The presbytery] can't take on a church's loan. Landino said. "Churches are responsible for the upkeep of their building." But after some preliminary digging, he concluded, "This was a presbytery decision that set this church up for some real challenges."

"Landino explains, "We had a chance to show care to three churches. We did not show care to Third."

A couple of weeks before his presentation to the presbytery, Landino met with the session at John Knox. "I wanted them to hear what I was going to say. Every time you tell a story, it needs a bad guy. I wasn't interested in that," said Landino, who depended at times on John Knox Presbyterian to provide documents and fill in gaps in his fact-finding. "They were good partners," he added.

Landino also met with the session at Third. Some of them were angry after hearing that the presbytery might have treated them in a way that left Third in tremendous debt. Others were anxious as they waited for the outcome of the evening.

That night in August, after Landino's PowerPoint, two motions were presented to be voted on: 1. To assume the remaining balance on the loan to the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program incurred by Third for building repairs, OR 2. Repayment of the loan plus all principle and interest that had been paid to PILP by Third, totaling approximately \$718,000. Continued

Giddings-Lovejoy, continued

Before the vote, Pastor Portis of Third spoke. “Giddings-Lovejoy, I stand before you today bearing the weight of not only a congregation ... but I stand before you as a representative of all African Americans who bear the burden to prove and convince the majority group that ‘our pain is real,’ ‘that our hurt is real.’”

The pastor pointed out that there was proof “harm was inflicted. I have made appeals for justice several times around the world, but I never thought I would have to come before my Christian siblings to make an appeal for justice,” Portis said. “If Christian people won’t do Christian things, then the church is absolutely lost.”

The motions were discussed and questioned. Someone asked why names were blackened out in the presentation. Landino said there was a procedure by which someone could find out those names, but he explained, “Withholding the individual names at this particular time is meant to focus us on the fact that the presbytery took this action collectively.” Reflecting on the August meeting, Third’s pastor viewed the move differently. “It was the protection of White fragility that upset me,” said Portis.

That night, everyone agreed harm had been done. The question was the best way to address it. The final decision was to pay the \$718,000, though it represented 13% of the presbytery’s total resources. “This is not the church saying we are just going to help this African American church that was in debt,” Portis says today. “The presbytery was wrong. They did some intentional things to harm and hurt this ministry. This is making that right.”



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“A lot of people were hugging me and coming up and saying they were sorry,” Portis said, adding. “It almost took on the spirit of a revival — at a Presbyterian meeting.”

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Before the Presbytery processed the checks to pay off Third’s debt, what Landino has called “a God thing” occurred. Word came that the Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery was named as a legal recipient of a trust from an estate and would receive \$810,000. The presbytery used this new gift to pay off Third’s debt and still had thousands left over. Continued on page 5

Better Together Bible Study

Monday, January 22, 2024

Finley Memorial Presbyterian Church

1:00-2:00 p.m.

Join John Tindall in exploring
the great stories and themes
of the Bible

calvin and hobbes



Giddings-Lovejoy, continued

To Portis, the gifted money means the presbytery did not suffer at all for the harm it caused.

“Here’s another way to look at it: Change only occurs when you are impacted financially, or physically,” he said. “With this money showing up, the presbytery was never really impacted. It’s as if someone else paid their debt.

How much would we (at Third) have been able to do if we had had that money all along? There is a punitive damage that has not been addressed.”



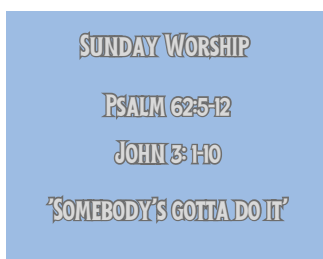
Since August, Portis said he has been preaching to his congregation about healing. When someone asked him, “How does it feel to be debt free?” the pastor said he responded, “That’s like asking a slave the day after he is released, ‘How does it feel to be free?’ I have never ministered without a mountain of debt. I said, ‘What your Whiteness wants is for us to be celebratory; we are not. We are trying to get over the fact that a presbytery we have lifted up and did all this labor for has deliberately harmed us. It is tough now to say the presbytery is our ally.” As for the presbytery, Landino says there is widespread work to put into place procedures that will assure that future financial agreements and other administration policies are “transparent, clear, consistent, accessible, and representative of the whole presbytery.”

Meanwhile, Susan Andrews, a former moderator of the PC(USA) and a member of Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery, is hopeful because of what she witnessed that August evening and because of other recent experiences. “I thought our church was finally saying something important (in the apology), but I was aware that it was just words,” said Andrews, who watched Landino’s presentation on Zoom.

“This was not the case of ‘Oh, this poor church that is suffering so much and has no resources,’” she said, referring to Third. “It was this thriving, mission-oriented church proclaiming the gospel the way it needs to be heard. It was not about bailing out a church but acknowledging an injustice and doing something about it.”

Andrews was moved to tears that night. She said with so many White churches in the presbytery dying, she saw this decision as “a moment of life” that will sustain the work Third is doing and have the ripple effect of impacting many other lives.

“There was a movement of spirit in the body that knew that this was the right thing to do. It was putting into action the words we had approved two years earlier. There was of White guilt, but this was about much more,” said Andrews. “This was a gospel moment. I think people feel this is one more step in the steps of repentance and restoration.”



Patrice Gaines is a former Washington Post reporter. She is a motivational speaker and spiritual life coach, the author of Laughing in the Dark, a memoir, and co-author of Say Their Names: How Black Lives Came to Matter in America.



Music Notes for January 21

Epiphany III

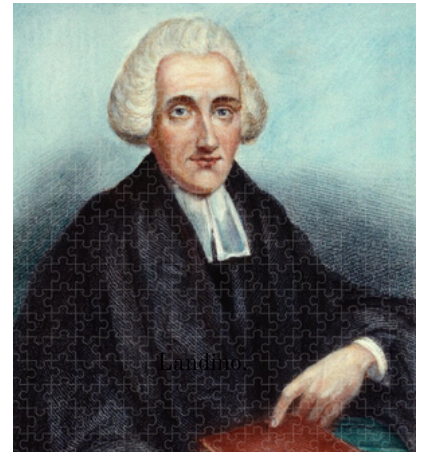
The Psalm for third Sunday of January reminds us of the strength of God as a rock, salvation and a fortress that will not be shaken. The hymns will be two favorites: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* and *Rock of Ages*.



Luther.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote both the text and melody for *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* between 1527 and 1529. Luther's beloved hymn has been translated into many other languages, and used as the basis for many musical adaptations by scores of composers, from Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) to Kari Tikka (1946-2002) in his opera, *Luther*.

Rock of Ages is one of over 100 poems penned by **Reverend Augustus Montague Toplady** (1740-1778). The legend behind the composition of the hymn comes from 1763, when Toplady was caught in a storm while traveling along the gorge of Burrington Combe in the Mendip Hills in England. Toplady sought refuge in a gap in the gorge and wrote the words to the iconic hymn. (Some historians dispute the account, but it still holds true in the minds of many.) The fissure is now marked as the "Rock of Ages." The music for the hymn was written by American Thomas Hastings (1784-1872), who penned over 1000 hymns during his lifetime.



Toplady.

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This Week in History.



American film pioneer **Hal Roach** (1892-1992) is born in Elmira, New York. He would produce and direct nearly 1,000 movies of all lengths, including the classic *Laurel and Hardy* comedies.

January 14, 1892



Golda Meir is the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit the Pope.

JANUARY 15, 1973



French industrialist **Andre Michelin** (1853-1931) is born in Paris, France. His Michelin Tire Company in 1888, would pioneer the use of pneumatic tires on autos.

January 16, 1853

Indira Gandhi, daughter of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is also elected prime minister. She would serve until 1975, and later from 1980 to 1984, when she was assassinated by her own bodyguards. Her only surviving son, Rajiv, would be the next prime minister, serving until his own assassination in 1991.

JANUARY 19, 1966



Captain **James Cook** sails his ship *Resolution*, across the Antarctic Circle- the first vessel to do so.

JANUARY 17, 1773



Robert Clifton Weaver is sworn in as the first African American cabinet member in U.S. history, becoming President Lyndon B. Johnson's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

JANUARY 18, 1966



Following his defeat in the English Civil War, **King Charles I** is tried on charges of treason. He would be found guilty, condemned as "a tyrant, traitor, murderer, and public enemy," and beheaded several in front of Whitehall Palace in London.

JANUARY 20, 1649