

Church flock may be evicted

Officials say they hope it doesn't come to that, but tax picture messy

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Sunday, May 21, 2006

By Ken Palmer

kpalmer@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6313

FLINT - Worshipers have been filing into Faith Gospel Temple on Sundays for 35 years. For the last of those years, they've been trespassing.

The Genesee County Land Bank has filed court papers to evict the congregation after taking ownership of the small church on the city's southeast side because of back taxes.

But officials say they hope it doesn't come to that.

"We really don't have a desire to own a church building," said Genesee County Treasurer Daniel T. Kildee, who chairs the Land Bank's board of directors.

"Our goal is, if we can find a way for them to continue to operate as a church, then that's the result that we want. Churches are good neighbors, and we want to keep them in place."

The county took ownership of Faith Baptist Temple, 1525 Kent St., and two other parcels on Kent last year after the old owner failed to pay back taxes. Kildee and others said they weren't sure how much is owed by the church, which belongs to the Church of God denomination.

Despite the county takeover, the congregation has continued to hold services there, with the Rev. James E. Walker Jr. living in the parsonage at 1613 Kent. The Flint Journal could not reach Walker for comment.

All three parcels with past-due taxes are listed in county records as being owned by the late Lola Walker, mother of the current pastor and wife of the Rev. James E. Walker Sr., who built the church in 1971.

The Land Bank filed eviction papers in Flint District Court this year. Hearings have been adjourned until Wednesday while the parties try to work out a deal to keep the church operating.

"I think this situation is a little bit unique and should be taken a look at to see if we can come to some kind of reasonable resolution," said Chris Christenson, an attorney for the church.

Christenson and Kildee said the current dilemma dates to 1971.

The elder Walker died just months after the church opened, and the property remained in his wife's name after she died in 1994, Christenson said. County records show that Lola Walker was the deed holder at the time of the tax foreclosure.

One mystery about the case is why the church even faces taxes for the property.

Churches are exempt from property taxes, but for reasons that are unclear, the church was never listed as a nonprofit organization and remained on the tax rolls. The taxes first became delinquent in 2002, the county records indicate.

QUICK TAKE

God and taxes

- **Background:** For three decades, Faith Gospel Temple, 1525 Kent St., Flint, remained on the tax rolls under the names of the original pastor, the Rev. James E. Walker Sr., or his wife, Lola.

- **Problem:** The Genesee County Land Bank became owner of the church and two other parcels on Kent Street last year after the owners failed to pay delinquent taxes.

- **Status:** Attorneys for the church and Land Bank are negotiating to sell the property back to the church.

Christenson said he was told that a woman hired to handle church finances ran off with the money without paying the taxes and other bills.

"They aren't sure, exactly, whether they received all of the old (tax foreclosure) notices," he said. "We can't confirm what documents that person has or had. But it fits the same time period of when the foreclosure was going on."

Kildee said the Land Bank is trying to work out a deal to sell the property to the church as a nonprofit entity, perhaps at half of its value. He'd like to see Faith Gospel promise to make improvements to the site.

After repeated efforts to get the money, Kildee said simply paying the back taxes won't resolve the matter.

"That would call into question the integrity of the tax foreclosure process," he said.

Kildee said he would have preferred not to file eviction actions against the church. But after receiving no response to a long series of notices, his office needed to do something "to get their attention," he said.
