

Chair Martinique Heath, AIA
Board of Zoning Adjustment
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite 200S
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Chair Heath and Members of the Board:

I am writing in support of St. Thomas' Episcopal Parish project. There are many tangible reasons that the board should approve the requested zoning variance: it will be difficult to build on the site, the project will return our church to its historic space on 18th Street and in less than the church's historic footprint, and the project will finally provide an adequate home for a faith community and the myriad other groups who would want to share our space. These reasons alone are enough to argue for a variance, but it's the intangible benefits that will provide the real blessings to our neighbors.

As Christians, we believe that we members, the Church, make up the body of Christ. This Church stands outside of any building that we designate as a church. But since the very beginnings of the Church, there have been churches. There have been churches because these buildings are useful tools for the Church to carry out its work. Not just the work of worshiping God in a place that elicits worship, which is the reason why we beautify our sanctuaries, but the work of serving others. Over the centuries, churches have fed and clothed the poor, provided healthcare, and generated social change, advocating for peace and civil rights. We are compelled to serve others because of our faith, which is nurtured in worship. The two are linked. The church building itself is historically the way Christians both foster and fulfill our mission. In our churches, we worship in the sanctuary, teach in classrooms, feed each other and the stranger in fellowship halls from fully-functioning kitchens, organize movements in boardrooms, provide pastoral care in offices, and send our members out into the world better than what they were when they came in. The building itself facilitates these possibilities of service. Without the building, we lack the tools to do the work we wish to do.

Although we have been able to do much — peace making in the 60's, AIDS work in the 80's and 90's, and gay rights from the very beginning of the movement, way, way before it was cool — our current building is reaching the end of its usefulness. As a tool, it is no longer up to the tasks that we assign it. The building is not handicap accessible. Getting caskets up the stairs is a harrowing task. There is not enough space on Sunday mornings to host all of the meetings and teaching that we wish to do. The building does not have a functioning kitchen. The building is difficult to find and many do not know we still exist. The roof leaks, and worshiping in the church is like worshiping in a dingy shoebox. Somehow, our community exists despite of our space, not because of it.

In a process that took almost a year, we dreamed up what we would do if we could. We carefully went through each ministry that we do or wish we could do, and rated it against the functionality of our current building, and every time our current building fell short. We aren't embarking on a multi-year journey to rebuild which is costly in every way just because we want a shiny new building and to annoy our neighbors; we are trying to rebuild because we simply cannot do what our faith calls us to do with what we have right now. By partnering with CAS Reigler, this work is now a possibility, when before, it was an impossibility. Our calling to do this work is what is driving us to ask for the variance to return to our historic footprint.

Finally, all considerations about the faith community aside, as an individual citizen of Washington, this city needs more housing desperately. As a clergywoman married to a civil servant with student loans, the cost of housing is simply too much for us to be able to afford to raise a family where we work. Both of us work in Ward 2, but we live in Ward 7, which leads to a significant amount of time spent commuting and a lower quality of life. We would love to someday be able to afford to live near our faith community and have our whole lives in one place. More housing availability can only help us someday be able to realize this dream.

Thank you for considering our zoning variance request, and for the work you do everyday to help our city thrive.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Rebecca Zartman

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