BC BAKER COOPER & ASSOCIATES, P.C. ARCHITECTS
4000 ALBEMARLE STREET N.W., SUITE 300, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20016 (202) 362-7879
E-mail Address: bakercooper@attglobal.net FAX: (202) 362-8108

ISHAM O. BAKER, FAIA
PHILIP S. COOPER, AIA
PAUL E. RAY, AIA

TESTIMONY OF
ISHAM O. BAKER, FAIA

January 21, 2003

Re: BZA Case 16968
Request for a Variance by Walker Memorial Baptist Church

Mr. Geoffrey Griffis and Members of the Board:

My name is Isham Baker, I reside at 5061 MacArthur Blvd., NW, Washington, DC, and I am president of Baker Cooper & Associates, P.C. Our office address is 4000 Albemarle Street, NW., Washington, DC.

Walker Memorial Baptist Church has effectively served the Washington DC community since 1890, and wishes to continue to do so. The success of the city in attracting new residents and businesses to the Cardoza/Shaw neighborhood, and the peculiar configuration of the adjacent properties on which the church wants to build, place Walker Memorial in a precarious position. At best, the circumstances limit Walker Memorial's growth, and at worse, the situation threatens the church's long term existence. For these reasons, we appeal to you for relief from this predicament.

Walker Memorial Baptist Church is located at 2020 13th Street, NW. on square 236, lot 62. The church also owns lot 48, a vacant lot north of the church. The alley between lots 62 and 48 was recently closed, and that property is now owned by Walker Memorial. (These properties are shown on our Exhibit 1.) Townhouses exist to the north and south of the church, and a public playground exists to the northwest. A large retail-apartment complex is under construction to the south west, along U Street.

Groups that use the church include the physically challenged. This applies to aged persons as well as to younger persons suffering from a leg injury. The level of the sanctuary is four feet, four inches above the level of the sidewalk, and the transporting of caskets from the sidewalk to the sanctuary is another important concern of the congregation. Walker Memorial recognizes both of these problems as critical to its mission and wishes to resolve these issues by adding an elevator to the complex as soon as practicable.

In examining the present Zoning Ordinance, no acceptable way to add an elevator was found. The only viable option seems to be for Walker Memorial to request a variance and to construct an elevator addition on lot 48 and the recently acquired alley. Because of the limited size of this site, the width of the addition has to be very shallow. Walker Memorial proposes that this addition contain a lobby wide enough to permit one to bring a casket inside (out of the elements) and wide enough to accommodate an elevator shaft and an elevator lobby on the sanctuary level. Other aspects of the addition (classrooms and offices) will be limited by this shallow width. (Exhibit 2 shows the proposed floor plans.) Although, this is not a large addition, the west wall of the proposed structure will be less than the required 15 feet from the rear

BZA
Case No. 16968
Exhibit No. 27

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16968
EXHIBIT NO.27

property line. Also, the current structure was built prior to the adoption of the present Zoning Ordinance, and exceeds the allowable lot occupancy of 60%. The existing church covers 86% of the lot, and the addition will reduce the lot coverage by only 1%. We, therefore, request a variance to the rear yard and the lot coverage provisions of the Zoning Ordinance, and present the following justifications:

THE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROPERTY MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR THE OWNER TO USE THE PROPERTY IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE ZONING REGULATIONS, AND THESE FACTORS CREATE A FINANCIAL HARDSHIP FOR THE OWNER IN USING THE PROPERTY CONSISTENT WITH THE ZONING REGULATIONS

No viable option exists for building the project within the requirements of the Zoning Ordinance: The only available property for the project is exceptionally shallow. Lot 48 and the adjacent alley are 40 feet deep. Square 236 contains approximately 54 lots, and fifty of these are deeper than 40 feet. In fact, almost all of the lots in the square are at least 100 feet deep! The depth of lot 62 and the adjacent alley make it difficult to accommodate even a modest sized institutional building on the property in accordance with the zoning regulations.

Other options for the addition were investigated and none proved to be acceptable. One option was to purchase additional property adjacent to the church. This is not feasible for several reasons: There is no vacant property, and the occupied land nearby is used either for residences, public parks or businesses. The parkland and the commercial property are not available. Purchase of the residences would be at extremely high costs and would also contribute to depletion of the housing stock in the area. The purchase of additional property in the area would also place an undue financial hardship on the church.

A second option for the addition was to tear down a portion of the front facade of the church and build a ramp along 13th Street. To do this would be extremely costly, placing an undue financial hardship on the church. Destruction of the facade would also destroy the appearance of Walker Memorial, would alter interior circulation of the facility, and would eliminate the chapel. This would deny Walker Memorial a major asset of any church-a meditation chapel, where one can find respite from the frantic pace of modern life.

GRANTING OF THIS APPLICATION WILL NOT BE OF SUBSTANTIAL DETRIMENT TO THE PUBLIC GOOD

Walker Memorial Baptist Church has occupied this site for many decades. Although the facilities of the church will increase with the addition, this will not mean a growth in the amount of traffic, noise, or lighting. A measurable increase in the number of persons who drive to the facility will not be triggered by BZA's acceptance of this application. Construction of facilities to make the church accessible to the physically challenged will help Walker Memorial retain its present membership. Approval of this application will enable the church to serve its congregation and the community better.

GRANTING OF THIS APPLICATION WILL NOT BE INCONSISTENT WITH THE GENERAL INTENT AND PURPOSE OF THE ZONING REGULATIONS

Walker Memorial Baptist Church is in an R-5-B District, where churches are permitted, and its location is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. The church was constructed prior to enactment of the present zoning restrictions, and its lot occupancy exceeds the limit of 60%. The existing church has a lot occupancy of 86%. The addition, however, will reduce the lot occupancy to 85%. Further reduction in the percent of lot occupancy is not possible without the acquisition of additional land. Such acquisition would decrease the housing stock in the area and probably incur the wrath of neighbors.

We strongly urge you to approve this application for a variance. Denial of this application would eliminate the church's only desirable option. The other alternatives would be for Walker Memorial to acquire additional land (further depleting the housing stock), destroy the front facade of its present building, or to move out of the locality. This would mean leaving a community which it has served for over a century-a neighborhood it loves and one by which it is loved.

Isham O. Baker
President