



# The InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC)

“Advancing Justice, Building Community, Nurturing Understanding”

June 24, 2008

Vincent C. Gray  
DC Council Chairman  
The John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairman Gray:

The InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC), an organization representing eleven diverse faith communities in the metropolitan Washington area, shares deep concerns with the issues being raised by the Third Church of Christ, Scientist’s property at 16<sup>th</sup> and I Streets, N.W. regarding the 1991 application to the Historic Preservation Review Board that the church be landmarked without the church’s consent.

The IFC writes to you today to express our support for proposed legislation B17-788, *The Religious Freedom and Historic Preservation Conformance Amendments Act of 2008*, which would amend the historic preservation law bringing it into conformance with the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. Under such conformance the Third Church of Christ, Scientist could file a substantial religious burden statement, thereby triggering relief from an historic designation.

For nearly thirty years, the InterFaith Conference has worked to preserve and strengthen the ministries of the various faith traditions in the greater Washington area. One of our deepest concerns is to defend the right of religious institutions to freely practice their faith unless a compelling state interest is met. In the case of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, IFC believes that the interest of historic preservation does not outweigh the substantial burden an historic designation would place on the church’s ability to exercise its religious practice.

Having served the downtown DC community for the last 90 years, always within six blocks of its current location, Third Church has aptly contributed to the health and welfare of our Nation’s Capital. Its Reading Room, open to the public daily for these 90 years, has provided a place of spiritual refreshment and inspiration for thousands—the sick, the job seeker, the emotionally weary, and the homeless. Third Church has also conducted a special program for patients in the VA methadone clinic. The banner with scriptural inspiration erected on its façade shortly after 9/11 to counteract fear and discouragement has received praise from all walks of life and was reported on in the *Wall Street Journal*. When the Mayor’s called for a city-wide day of prayer

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*The InterFaith Conference (IFC) brings together the Baha’i, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Latter-day Saints, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh and Zoroastrian faith communities in this region to promote dialogue, understanding and a sense of community among persons of different faiths and to work cooperatively for social and economic justice in metropolitan Washington.*



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for youth, the church responded with a special prayer service. Similarly it has responded to many other city wide calls for prayer which have supported the city’s efforts for betterment.

Thirty seven years after moving to its current location at 16<sup>th</sup> and I Streets, the church now finds itself unable to carry out its Scriptural and *Church Manual* requirements within the context of its building structure. Overall, the age and style of the building’s construction make it impossible for the church to use and to maintain it for basic use, not to mention for extended hospitality to the public. In particular, in its current condition Third Church is not able to properly heat and cool the building or to maintain the structure without imposing a massive financial burden on its members.

The InterFaith Conference fully supports the right of Third Church and other religious communities like it, to articulate their concerns related to freedom of expression and to be exempt from historic designation if a substantial burden on their religious exercise is imposed.

Therefore, the InterFaith Conference urges you to support Bill 17-788, to allow Third Church and other religious communities like it, a chance to articulate their concerns related to freedom of expression and to be exempt from historic designation if a substantial burden on their religious exercise is imposed. *Specifically, we ask that you hold hearings on the bill so that Third Church and its advocates have a chance to share their views directly with the entire DC Council.*

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine  
Executive Director

William Aiken  
Chairperson, IFC Steering Committee  
for the InterFaith Center for Advancing Justice

