

**Reverend Peter Semeyn  
Senior Pastor\* at the Reformed Church of Palos Heights**

When Rev. Peter Semeyn served as Senior Pastor of the Reformed Church of Palos Heights, he made it a practice to convene “family meetings” whenever there were significant changes in the life of the congregation. At these meetings, information would be shared and there would be an opportunity to ask questions. Although Rev. Semeyn and the lay elected board had the power to make decisions, they would also seek congregational approval. During the first eight years of his ministry in Palos Heights, the congregation had increased from just over 200 members to some 800; it was a period of tremendous vitality and growth. The congregation discussed the need for a larger facility, and voted to relocate the ministry to Bell Road in nearby Lemont Township. In the family meetings that followed, they discussed everything from their emotions over the sale of the church building to the design for the new facility.

For more than a year, they informally explored selling the building to Trinity Christian College, the City of Palos Heights, the library, and other local entities. Without any interest in the property, and with rising pressures to move, they listed the church with a realtor. The executive committee met in the spring of 2000 to review the three contracts that had been presented to the realtor: two were from Christian churches, and one was from the Al Salam Mosque Foundation. “And in real estate, unless you have another reason to say no to a deal, you have to take the highest bidder. That’s just law. Or else you are showing bias, showing prejudice. And so, it wasn’t like rocket science.” Soon thereafter, representatives from the Al Salam Mosque Foundation came and toured the building. “So for me -- naively, in some ways, I guess -- it was a real estate transaction.” He recalls having a sense that some people would not be pleased, “but we never, ever, ever imagined that it would come to this.”

For Pastor Semeyn and the rest of the executive committee, this wasn’t an emotional or theological issue: “We technically could not do anything other than engage in this real estate contract with them, whether we wanted to or not. And we didn’t want to, but it didn’t make any difference whether we wanted to or not; we were legally bound to.” At a family meeting on March 26, 2000, the congregation first learned that a contract had been signed and that the buyer was a mosque. Semeyn recalls that there was some opposition, in part because some still didn’t like the idea of moving from Palos Heights. He recalls, “I understand that people get emotional attachments, but part of your responsibility as a leader is to help people understand what you’re really talking about.”

Pastor Semeyn explains that it is important to situate this conflict in the context of Chicago, which is often called “the City of Neighborhoods.” In this city with ethnic enclaves, people often gather together with people who share the same language, the same cultural traditions, and the same religious practices. Pastor Semeyn explains: “the second-largest Polish population in the world, in one spot, is in Chicago. The largest is Warsaw, Poland. ... Why? Because Poles move here, just like immigrants did hundreds of

years ago when we first settled here, and they go to find like-minded people. People who speak Polish, people who may be second cousins, they have Polish Catholic churches.”

When these neighborhoods changed, and became more diverse, Chicago became a case study in “White Flight.” As African Americans moved in, some whites moved out, and property values began to drop. Many of those who came to Palos Heights in the 1960s came from the city of Chicago, with experiences that Rev. Semeyn believes fueled this dispute. Some of this was implicit in the conversations he heard, others were more explicit. “That was painful for me as a pastor.” He recalls, “In the year 2000, that I could have people say, ‘My parents were chased out of Roseland, and I’m not going to get chased out of Palos Heights.’” Pastor Semeyn observes that many of the arguments made were emotional, not rational. He continued having family meetings with his congregation to talk through some of the emotions, to try to unpack some of the bias and ignorance. “Fear of change is very common, among people. And then, some of it is racial prejudice, some of it is religious bias, some of it is ignorance, and some of it is just fear of what they think they know will happen.”

Semeyn continued, “When we would sit in our Parish meetings, and people would say things that were obviously racist and bigoted, it pierced my heart, that was very hurtful to me, because I don’t believe that is what Jesus wants us to be about. However, they in their minds, and I would have no reason to question that, were Christians. But that part of their life was not transformed yet by Christ’s love. And that was another thing I emphasized all the time... People would say ‘Islam is the enemy of Christianity,’ And I would say, ‘Well, what does Jesus say to do with your enemies?’ It’s not like I came up with all this material myself (laughs); there’s a lot of good material you can use.”

Pastor Semeyn recalls the guidance he offered, and the sermons he gave, as the dispute unfolded: “When property values are more important than human values, then we have lost the heart of what Jesus Christ wants us to be about.” Further, he explained that, “because you are going to sell your building to an Islamic Mosque, does not mean you are in agreement with Islamic theology. It doesn’t mean you’re embracing Islam. You’re doing a real estate deal.” He continues, “Biblically speaking, the church is not a building. The people are the church.” As the dispute took on a more worrisome tenor, he spoke out to his congregation: “Every person, every living human being is created in the image of God, and therefore deserves our dignity and our respect. Now we’re going to have disagreements about theology, or whatever the case may be, but that is not the point. Everybody deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.”

He spoke these words, and also wrote them down and distributed them at church. As a leader, Pastor Semeyn wanted to be sure his message was clear, and would neither be misunderstood nor misquoted. One memo, written April 23, 2000, reviewed some of the information about the sale that was discussed at a congregational meeting. The memo was intended to respond to questions of the congregation, and to clarify any inaccuracies that may have appeared in the media coverage. It explained that the church had signed a contract with the Al Salam Mosque Foundation, and provided details of the contract, including price and contingencies. The memo continues:

“Q. Can we sell the property to any other buyer while this contract is pending? A. No. We could sign a second contract that is contingent of the cancellation of the present contract.”

“Q. What could happen if the congregation does not approve the sale? A. Because the contract sales price is higher than the listing price, there is no valid legal reason to not approve the sale. Disapproval of the sale for any improper reason would subject the church to discrimination complaints which could have serious consequences.”

“Q. Why did we sign a contract with a non-Christian group? A. For over a year we tried to sell the property to a number of entities (secular, religious and commercial) to no avail. We held off some prospective buyers with hopes of selling to RCA [Reformed Church of America] congregations. When all attempts to sell on our own failed, we listed the property with a broker. Any bona fide buyer offering the selling price (\$2 million) requires the seller by law to accept that offer unless there are unreasonable provisions in the contract.”

“Q. Will the sale have a negative impact on the community? A. The use of the property by the buyer must be in accordance with the regulations of the village of Palos Heights and will serve the needs of the Moslem residents of our area.”

“Q. What are the theological ramifications of this contract? A. This entire process has been bathed in prayer. One could say ‘certainly God wouldn’t want us to sell to a non-Christian group.’ But on what basis? Frequently in the Old and New Testament God used non believers to accomplish His purposes. On the other hand, we must ask the question, ‘What is God trying to teach us by providing these buyers?’ ... Maybe God is bringing us alongside Muslims to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to show that Christ’s people are loving and accepting, that the Christian church needs to be a leader in embracing people of other cultures in communities. In addition, it is clear from the scriptures that the church is not a building, but people. When we move to Bell Road our church goes with us. This facility has served the cause of Christ for 40 years. God has expanded our ministry beyond the capability of this facility and He is giving us a new place to expand His influence. Throughout the course of this entire process we can point to places where God has been at work in spite of us. At the same time, the sale of our property has not yet been executed. If God wants something else to take place, He will intervene.”

“Conclusion: This is a very difficult situation for all of us. Change is always experienced as loss and accompanied by grief. Many members have strong memories of significant spiritual experiences and important relationships that they associate with our present facility. At the same time we have decided to move to Bell Road and keep providing opportunities for people to meet Christ and to

experience a developing relationship with Him. We must continue to be in prayer for the entire process and open to God's leading."

The update was signed by the Administrative Board, including Harry De Bruyn, the church's lawyer, and Peter Semeyn, the senior pastor.

Pastor Semeyn did not attend the city council meetings, but occasionally watched them on cable television: "It was out of control, it was irrational, they were not interested in any of the facts." These meetings, he believes, reflected a lack of understanding of the virtues of civil discourse. "Having civil discourse is about respecting dignity even though you disagree. And that just wasn't the case, because emotions fuel things. Emotions short circuit intellect." Further, he wanted to maintain his position: that this was a private real estate matter between two parties, not a subject for discussion and debate in city hall. Before Pastor Semeyn went into the ministry, he taught political science at the high school level. "My personal philosophy as a minister is, I don't take any political stances in the pulpit." Instead, he focused his energies on speaking with his congregation about the ethical issues involved.

As the controversy raged in Palos Heights, some of the anger was directed at the Reformed Church and Pastor Semeyn. He received a number of letters from townspeople, all of them anonymous. "They would say things to me, wow, you'd really have to have a lot of guts to say that, but they didn't have the guts to put their name on it." Throughout this, he and the church leadership tried to keep a sense of humor: "We used to laugh, because either you laughed or you cried during this time. You know, 'We were sitting around one night because we got nothing to do at our church and we thought, how can we ruin Palos Heights? Let's sell to Islam.' (laughs)"

Pastor Semeyn didn't view Palos Heights as a "Christian City"; he doesn't think there is such a thing. "I think there are cities with Christians." While he views this identification as naïve, it isn't unique to Palos Heights: "There are some people who believe that the United States is a Christian nation, was founded under Judeo-Christian principles." He believes that the controversy revealed to the citizens of Palos Heights that their city was far more diverse than they had known. There were already many Muslim families in Palos Heights, and in nearby Bridgeview, there is a large mosque. "So to think there weren't Muslims living around, you'd have to have blinders on – and a lot of people do." Pastor Semeyn explains that one of his daughter's best friends growing up was Muslim, "Not Dutch, not Irish. Her dad was a member of the mosque, the Al Salam Mosque. He lived in Palos Heights for years. Several local businesses are owned by Islamic people, who are Arabs."

Whether the lack of knowledge of diversity reveals bigotry, naïveté, or ignorance, Semeyn notes, "As a Christian, the sadness of the inability to accept people as human beings, even though you don't agree with them theologically, was disappointing." He continues, "I don't agree theologically with Islam. However, everybody deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. My father was a World War II Veteran, OK? He fought so that people could have the right to have freedom to practice their religion in our

country, and in other places. And so, how could I go back on that, now? That's what's interesting to me, when someone stands up in a city council meeting and says '...They oughta all just go back where they came from,' ...Well, that means pretty much we all better pack up and go home – unless you're a Native American. That's where we all belong, somewhere else."

When an offer was made to Al Salam, Pastor Semeyn felt outrage as a private citizen: he didn't want his tax dollars to "pay off somebody to get out of a real estate deal." He felt it was illegal and immoral. He kept asking himself, "What in the world does a city council have anything to do with a real estate deal between two private organizations, who are religious in nature?" He had known Koldenhoven before the controversy, through coaching basketball at a local school. During the conflict, they would often sit down together to talk about issues like the letters to the pastors. "Dean made no bones about the fact that he was a Christian. And that he felt his responsibility, in his own kind of humble way." He recalls that the Koldenhoven was guided by the question "What would Jesus do?" "Dean was saying, 'I'm a Christian, I believe everybody needs to be treated with dignity and respect, even if I don't agree with what they believe or do.' That's all he was saying. And that was consistent with who he was as a person and what he believed as a Christian. I think for him to take a stance on it was just keeping integrity with who he was as a person."

Pastor Semeyn didn't understand why the Muslims accepted the \$200,000 offer. "Because if you truly felt this was what you wanted to do and you were willing to fight for it, then why would you accept the buyout?" He made no comment at the time, and didn't discuss the issue with any of the Muslim leadership, as he and the church leadership wanted to maintain the unbiased perspective of sellers of a property. "We aren't going to encourage you to accept it; we aren't going to question why you did or didn't do it." By the time it was all over, Pastor Semeyn explains, his congregation was "pretty much left by the side of the road as road kill."

He explains, "We were a congregation of this town who was simply trying to sell a piece of property that we own so that we could move on with our ministry to a more conducive spot, in terms of capacity. And in the course of our private real estate deal with another entity, an outside party intervened, and got in the middle of it, and the whole thing is lost." He recognizes that the church could have sued the city of Palos Heights for their intrusion in a private real estate deal, or even sued the Mosque Foundation, which had a signed contract, but, after the veto, they "just dropped it." He notes, "We didn't make a big deal out of it; 'let them out of it.' Internally, around the table of our leadership, we said 'look, if they don't want to pursue this, we aren't going to hold them to it. There is too much legalism that gets in the way of relationships, anyway.'" The congregation tried to move on from this controversy, as they had other things to do.

In November, Palos Heights held a referendum asking citizens if the city should pursue the purchase of the church for a recreational facility. Pastor Semeyn says, "It was embarrassing to be a citizen of Palos Heights." He asks, "How can you have a referendum to buy a piece of property that you haven't even consulted with the sellers

about?” He saw the referendum as an attempt by some of the aldermen to justify their position during the conflict, and was not surprised when it was defeated. It wasn’t the ideal facility for their needs in 1998, and it wasn’t right in 2000. Following the referendum, the administrative committee of the church wrote a letter to the city clerk, council, and mayor, which explained that, “due to the canceling of our contract with the Al [Salam] Mosque Foundation, and the controversy surrounding that contract, we have decided to enter into a time of discernment. Our congregation is preparing to embark on a six month ‘refocusing’ project that involves prayer and conversation amongst ourselves that will lead to a detailed ministry plan for our future. During this time we need to give our full attention to ‘listening to God.’”

When he heard that the Justice Department was becoming involved, and setting up a dialogue group, “it kind of caught us off guard. I think that in some ways we were a little naïve, or just didn’t realize, that this would be on the radar screen of the federal government. First of all we were naïve enough to believe that it shouldn’t even be on the radar screen of the local government.” He felt there was some merit to having dialogue after the conflict, but noted, “The people who were causing the problems in Palos Heights were not interested in dialogue; they were only interested in getting their way. They were people who were just obstructionists; they were not interested in dialogue or cooperation.” The people who participated in dialogue were already open to discussion and diversity, he added. He compared the dialogue groups to parenting classes: “When we offer parenting classes at church, the best parents attend. People who are not very good parents don’t come. It’s the same kind of thing.”

He sees education as critical: “People make broad brush, sweeping generalizations about people who are affiliated with other ethnic and/or religious groups, I found that with both Muslims about Christians and Christians about Muslims. Being able to sit down and have dialogue, and be open about things and truly coming to an understanding of what other religions are about, and faith systems are about, is important. But, I guess I’ve also found the reality is that people aren’t motivated to do that, sometimes until they are threatened by something. The intellectual curiosity about things -- that is a limited number of people who live in any given community.”

If Semeyn was offering advice to another religious leader facing a conflict over religious diversity, he would say, “don’t overestimate the sophistication, in regards to the acceptance of ethnic and racial diversity, in your community. When you are not that diverse, you think you can accept the diversity. And when it stares you in the face, it becomes a little less easy to handle, and ugliness comes out of the woodwork that you didn’t know was there. Don’t overestimate how sophisticated you are, in that regard. Don’t give our society too much credit for having made a whole lot of progress in these areas.”

Pastor Semeyn notes, “Palos Heights maybe is a microcosm of what is too often the way people in America think and do things. We’re still terribly bigoted.” He was embarrassed when the city was called “Palos Hates” by the media, but feels it was more of a “clever, catchy label” than a description. The loudest, angriest voices were heard during this

dispute, but the majority did not object to the mosque. “I think it was a minority of people in Palos Heights that were upset. The majority rarely come out.” Looking back, he isn’t sure what lessons were learned by the people of Palos Heights. Some feel a sense of victory; others might feel vindicated after 9/11. He hopes that there were more positive lessons: “I think that some people learned lessons about civil discourse, about what it means to live in a pluralistic society.”

One of the broader lessons, he feels, is related to tolerance. “Tolerance isn’t always synonymous with acceptance. I can tolerate someone else’s different religious views without accepting them. Tolerating people is accepting *them*, I think, but not viewpoints, ideas. Hey, I have to tolerate my teenage daughter, but I don’t agree with everything that she does or says. She likes 50 Cent and I don’t.” True tolerance, for Pastor Semeyn, includes tolerating the intolerance of others. “And then, at the same time, over the issue of tolerance is the grid of the law of the land. So you don’t even have to like or accept what some people are or do, but you have to, in our country, embrace their right to do it.”

Pastor Semeyn views the conflict as a Christian and as an American: “As an American, who lives in a land of freedom, I understand that everybody has the freedom of religion.” I forget which philosopher it was who said that, ‘I couldn’t disagree with you more, but I would fight to the end for your right to believe that.’ ... That’s kind of what I think. I might disagree with people, but I would fight to the end for their right to believe that. And if you have that attitude, you are engaging in civil discourse; if you have that kind of attitude, you are engaging in tolerance.”

He sees the case of Palos Heights as instructive, and has spoken about the issues that arose at his former seminary. Utilizing this story as a tool for theological education, he jokes, “Jesus knew what he was talking about. (Laughs) ....He talked about taking the high road, about turning the other cheek, about loving your neighbor, all those lessons, like the Sermon on the Mount, are applicable in these kinds of situations.” The challenge for the Pastor becomes, how do you learn to love those in your congregation who are biased and bigoted: “You have people in your congregation who literally believe that they are devout Christians and racists at the same time: an impossible combination. But for them, in their own mind, it isn’t somehow. You are still their pastor.” He jokes, “Churches are full of sinners, if they are not we’re out of business. And thank goodness for that, business will always be good.”

While his own congregation suffered greatly from this dispute, he explains, “a Christian perspective is that you always learn something through suffering. So you learn something about yourself, good, bad, and ugly; some of the stuff that was revealed about our own congregation and people’s own biases and bigotry. We all had to step back a little bit and look at that kind of thing, we had to try to figure out how to get along, even when we disagree.”

*\*Reverend Semeyn is now the Senior Pastor at the Faith Reformed Church in Traverse City, Michigan*