

[The Morning Call](#)

April 5, 2007

Church keeps Easter fire burning in Center City

"The light will still be there. And so will we.

We will be there gathered around a light that burns in Center City Allentown.

We are here to stay."

Op-Ed

Patrick Malloy

I live in Center City Allentown. Not once since I came here five years ago have I been afraid. When I tell people where I live, most of them look at me with something like shock. They think I must be out of touch with reality, or I would know better.

And, I work in Center City Allentown. I am the rector of a remarkable parish that made a decision decades ago not to abandon the neighborhood as it fell apart. No one would have condemned them for running. But instead, they dug in and decided to make a difference. And they have.

I am the only member of Grace Church who lives anywhere near the church. Gradually, the Episcopalians in the neighborhood, like so many families here for generations, moved out. Those who could not afford to move, or could not bear it, barricaded themselves in their houses until death took them away and their children sold the homes.

Grace Church was a neighborhood church once. Now we come from all over the Lehigh Valley, convinced that holding onto the property at 5th and Linden and holding onto the life we have here is a genuine mission. We think of it as an invitation by God to tend an outpost of heaven in a neighborhood that many people think of as more like hell. But, leave religion out of it, substitute "social movement" for mission, and what happens on our corner is still worth doing.

We have gained a reputation in the Valley and even a modest fame in the country. At a national conference we were once called "the biggest small church in the United States." What the speaker had in mind were our extensive social efforts: Grace Montessori School, AIDS Outreach, a food bank that provides for 400 families each month, GED classes, the Weed and Seed employment office and job bank. All of it makes a tremendous difference in our neighborhood, and we can do it only because we stayed.

We do not pretend that the number of murders last year in Center City was negligible, or that no one deals drugs down the block. We do not deny that the world is full of people who are scared by the skin color of many of our neighbors. And, yet, we stay. We stay because -- to put it in a thoroughly non-PC way -- we are disciples of Jesus, who commissioned us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and comfort the afflicted. We stay here because they are here.

This is the week Christians call "Holy." It is holy because it brings into high relief the heart of the story we tell about Jesus. It is the story of a man so committed to compassion

and truth that he would not turn and run even as death stared him in the face. Our ancestors left us testimony that his refusal to be dominated by fear ushered him into what they called "resurrection." In secular terms that means that sometimes, maybe all the time, if you refuse to be dominated by fear, if you dig in and stand your ground in the face of what terrifies you, you have set yourself on the course that leads to life.

With exceptions rarer than rare, the only people who are ever hurt in Center City Allentown put themselves in situations that are dangerous. The neighborhood isn't dangerous. I live in the neighborhood. I work in it. This is our home. And not once have any of us or our property been threatened or hurt.

Our Easter celebration at Grace Church, as in many churches, stretches over three days, a period we call "the Triduum." It culminates on Holy Saturday, the night before Easter Sunday. We gather in night's darkness in Center City. Our good friends at the Baum School lend us their grounds, and there we build a fire. The fire marshal stands and watches, because you never know what a fire in the city might do. We all take flame and carry it across Linden Street into our church, and by its light we hear the stories of our ancestors, the Jews, and of our Lord, the Christ. They were people who would not let fear stop them from living the mission they sensed deep within themselves.

The Book of Exodus tells us of the Hebrews being led through the darkness by a pillar of fire as they escaped slavery. The memoirs of our Christian ancestors tell us of Jesus living a life so dazzlingly bright that no darkness, not even death, could extinguish it. And in the darkness of Center City Allentown, we experience the light for ourselves in the night before Easter dawns. We experience it in the baptismal water we pour and in the holy Food and Drink we share, and, perhaps most of all, in one another, huddled bravely around a daring fire that stands against dark fear. It happens every year, and this year, it will happen again. The light will still be there. And so will we. We will be there gathered around a light that burns in Center City Allentown. We are here to stay. We'll stay put, and we'll build a fire, and we'll wait to be surprised. You never know what a fire in the city might do.

[The Rev. Patrick Malloy is the rector of Grace Episcopal Church at N. Fifth and Linden streets in Allentown.]