

Gothic Facade Splits Grace Church

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

A key member of the 15-man vestry of Grace Church has broken with the church leadership over its plans to demolish an historic row of Gothic revival buildings because of what he termed the "hypocrisy" with which the church handled the issue.

Lindsay Schepmoes, the 35-year-old clerk of the vestry, is now working with the Joint Emergency Committee to Save the Grace Church Houses and is joining that group as a plaintiff in its lawsuit to bar razing of the buildings.

The two Gothic Revival buildings on Fourth Av. are behind the church itself but form an architectural unit with it.

They are scheduled to be replaced by a two-story gym which had long been needed by the church. Alternative

proposals have been offered that would provide the facility while maintaining the Gothic facade.

Church leaders, however, claim the added cost of saving the facade is beyond the church budget.

Schepmoes decided to come forward publicly following a vestry meeting last Tuesday. At that meeting, Schepmoes says, he learned that "heaven and earth were moved" to achieve "quick demolition" while the preservationist group was "deliberately misled" to think there was time left for the raising of funds to preserve the Gothic facade.

Contract Signed

"One of the vestrymen boasted that they had 'quietly' signed a contract for demolition on Feb. 22," Schepmoes said, "while letting the emergency committee think the church would

wait until the March 1 deadline. That really got me. It's bad enough for this to happen in political circles but in a church vestry this kind of hypocrisy is enough to make anyone sick."

Last week, the church rector, Dr. Benjamin Minifie, acknowledged that the contract was signed Feb. 22 but maintained that he had told the rescue committee if they could "pull off a miracle and find sizeable sums" the church would not move ahead.

Schepmoes said, a motion was approved at last week's vestry meeting to hire a public relation firm "to blunt the controversy at whatever expense even though the church has no money for preservation." Dr. Minifie says only that there "was some talk of this, but we haven't taken final action."

The 1843 church, at Broad

way and 10th St., was designated a city landmark in March, 1966. According to a former staff member of the Landmarks Commission, the Fourth Av. houses were supposed to be considered for designation at the same time. They were taken off the agenda, said the former staff member, because "that was the only way the church would agree to designation without a fight."

However, the Landmarks Commission announced last week that it would hold a hearing Mar. 22 to consider whether the Fourth Av. houses should now be designated.

Funds Sought

The Joint Emergency Committee is working to raise the \$350,000 the church claims is needed to both preserve the facade and build the new facility even though that amount has been disputed.

The committee has been joined by some members of the Grace Church parish who contributed funds several years ago for the new facility with the understanding the Gothic facade would be left standing.

The committee filed suit a week ago to obtain an injunction against demolition. That injunction was extended last Friday by State Supreme Court Judge Margaret Mangan with no indication of how long the extension would be.

Schepmoes acknowledges that last June he gave up trying to persuade the vestry to take a preservation course and "responded to strong pressures" to go along with the decision to demolish. He maintains, however, that saving the facade was never given "the kind of consideration church leaders are now claiming."

He adds further: "There are now larger implications than Grace Church. More and more people are fed up with tearing down. I'm typical of this. I've never been an activist on this before but from now on I will be."