

# Parishioners Split Over Sale of Park Av. Church

By **ROBERTA B. GRATZ**

A faction within the congregation of Central Presbyterian Church is fighting the church's proposed sale to the Asia Society—and, in effect, its demolition.

The society, a prestigious cultural and public affairs institution located next door to the church on 64th Street off Park Avenue, plans to tear down the church and build new headquarters.

An Ad Hoc Committee of Concerned Members wrote the more than 250 parishioners this week in an effort to persuade them to vote against the sale at a membership meeting Sunday.

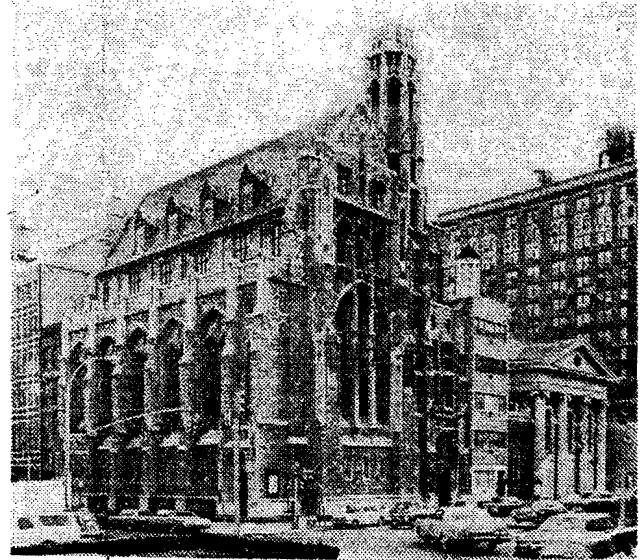
"If the Central Presbyterian Church is not necessary to the life of its congregation, why have you remained a member?" the letter asks.

### 'Another Viewpoint'

"In recent weeks," it reads, "you have been presented with only one side of the proposed sale of the church's properties to the Asia Society. We believe the situation has been prejudicially stated and ask you to consider another viewpoint — one that would save the pulpit and revitalize the congregation."

Earlier this year, John D. Rockefeller 3d announced he was giving his \$10 million collection of 300 objects of Asian art to the society, which he helped found, along with funds to build a new home. The society is housed in a glass-front, highly-acclaimed building designed by Phillip Johnson and built in 1959.

Ironically, the Central Presbyterian Church was built in 1922 by the Rockefeller family—it was originally the Park Avenue Baptist Church — and was their primary home of worship until the construction in the late 1920s of Riverside Church.



The Central Presbyterian Church at 64th Street and Park Avenue would be demolished to make way for expansion of the Asia Society (glass building at left) if the congregation approves the sale of the property at a meeting on Sunday.

Post Photo by Richard Gummere

The Ad Hoc Committee began organizing opposition to the planned sale this week even though negotiations have been under way for a year. Under the proposed agreement, the congregation would not be required to vacate the building before May 31, 1976, although the society would take title on July 1. The congregation would then merge with another Presbyterian church or share facilities with a church.

The ad hoc group includes three people on the 21-member Session, the church's governing body.

The Session voted 13-5 in December to accept a reported \$2.6 million sale offer, having rejected a prior offer of \$2.3 million in September. The dissidents argue that the September vote was by secret ballot and that the December one was not. This, along with other "parliamentary finagling," prevented

a full airing of the issues, they say.

The dissidents claim the church's financial picture is not as grave as the leadership has pictured it. If there was a change at the top, the congregation could increase in size and vitality, they say.

Dr. Robert A. Edgar, senior pastor and reportedly the prime mover behind the sale, was asked by church leadership to leave last June.

He was, members say, supposed to announce his departure on Jan. 1, effective in one year from that date. However, he reportedly has not done so.

Asked to comment on the dissension, Dr. Edgar declined: "My dilemma is that if I recognize the comments, it gives credence to them and takes it out of the warmth of our own congregation."

He added that at Sunday's meeting the vote would be by secret ballot.