

SANCTUARY CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

34 East Sharpnack Street
Philadelphia PA 19119
Bishop Guy L. Glimp, Pastor

Statement in Opposition to Historic Designation **34–36 E. Sharpnack Street | Philadelphia Historical Commission Hearing** **Submitted by Sanctuary Church of God in Christ – May 9, 2025**

Good morning. My name is Bishop Guy Glimp, Jurisdictional Bishop for the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Pennsylvania, responsible for more than 80 congregations statewide. I have served as the pastor of Sanctuary Church since 1994.

Sanctuary Church of God in Christ appears today pursuant to the Commission’s order reopening the record in this matter. The prior vote to designate 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street was taken **without the written notice required by Philadelphia Code §14-1004(4) and Rule 6.1 of the Commission’s Rules of Procedure.**

- **No Effective Notice Reached the Authorized Recipients.** After reviewing church records and e-mail archives, the trustees can locate **no evidence that a nomination packet, agenda, or hearing notice ever reached the titled owner, the pastor, or any trustee in their official capacities.** If any mailing was sent, it did not make its way to the individuals empowered to respond on the congregation’s behalf.
- **Informal After-Service Conversation ≠ Notice.** We understand the nominating party later claimed that a representative “spoke with someone at the church after a Sunday service.” That conversation—held with an unidentified congregant who was neither pastor nor trustee—**does not satisfy the Code’s requirement that formal notice be delivered to the property owner of record.**
- **No Outreach Meeting Requested.** At no point did the nominating organization request or schedule a meeting with the pastor, the trustees, or counsel to explain the designation process, despite best-practice guidance in the Commission’s own nomination handbook encouraging early dialogue with owners.

Accordingly, the congregation was **deprived of its statutory and constitutional right to due process** before an adverse determination affecting its property interests was entered. We appreciate the Commission’s recognition of this defect and its decision to vacate the earlier action, thereby returning the parties to the status quo ante and affording Sanctuary Church the full and fair hearing to which it is entitled.¹

¹ To be clear, by participating in this process, Sanctuary Church is not waiving, and hereby reserves, all rights and remedies it may have to challenge the initial designation process and the merits of the same.

For more than half a century, this stone chapel on Sharpnack Street has echoed with worship, prayer, and service under congregations of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—the largest African American Pentecostal denomination in the world. In 1972, Grace Baptist Church, having built a larger facility nearby, transferred the building to Mount Airy COGIC. In 1981, Mount Airy entrusted it to its sister congregation—Sanctuary COGIC—an active worship community continuing ministry at the site to this day.

We honor Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Sr., Dr. Mary Henderson Wright, and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr; however, we must respectfully **oppose the proposed historic designation** for five principal reasons:

1. **Financial Hardship**—including existing operating debt and major unfunded repairs.
2. **Incomplete Historical Record**—the nomination stops at 1968, omitting 53 years of continuous COGIC stewardship and significant alterations.
3. **Mission & Ministry Needs** that require freedom to adapt, partner, or relocate.
4. **Changed Community Context & Site Limitations**—especially chronic parking shortages that hinder funerals, weddings, and any potential merger.
5. **Good-Faith Commemorative Alternative** that secures the Grace Baptist/Wright legacy without a legal encumbrance.

We therefore ask the Commission to deny the nomination or, at minimum, refuse it unless materially new evidence is supplied.

1 | Financial Hardship

Sanctuary Church’s existing financial hardships would be exacerbated by a historic designation, risking insolvency, vacancy, and deterioration—outcomes contrary to preservation goals.

- Sanctuary Church is already carrying a significant financial burden, which limits its capacity to address urgent building needs and sustain its ministries.
- The annex exterior masonry is failing; stabilization alone is estimated at over \$150,000. The entire annex interior stands gutted following water and structural damage.
- Historic designation would mandate preservation-grade materials and Commission review for every exterior repair—likely tripling costs.
- Preparing a formal hardship petition (including but not limited to, financial statements, appraisals, marketing analyses) would itself consume funds Sanctuary does not have and cannot raise.
- Diverting scarce dollars into mandatory façade work would shrink or eliminate life-sustaining ministries: food-pantry, youth tutoring and scholarship awards, emergency aid distributed throughout the state.

- Moreover, a designation may also hinder access to financing and charitable donations needed to fund repairs, creating a downward spiral that jeopardizes the church’s very existence.

2 | Incomplete Historical Record

While the nomination outlines an important early history, it fails to account for more than five decades of continued ownership, worship, and substantial alteration under Church of God in Christ leadership—leaving the historical record incomplete and misleading.

- The nomination’s period of significance ends in 1968, ignoring 53 years of continuous COGIC ownership, worship, and community service from 1972 to 2025—nearly half the building’s life.
- Post-1968 alterations—1975 classroom build-out, 1992 sanctuary re-arrangement, 2008 full refurbishment of the interior worship space, 2019 new HAVC system, ongoing annex gutting—substantially affect integrity under (Criteria A & J).
- The Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas has vacated designations that, among other things, rest on incomplete records or impose disproportionate burdens on religious owners. *See e.g., 5250 Unruh Ave. Associates v. City of Philadelphia Historical Commission*, PA Court of Common Pleas, (Case ID 210100403) (vacating the City of Philadelphia’s Ordinance to designate a property as a historical building); St. Donato’s Church.

3 | Mission, Ministry & Merger Feasibility

Our mission is people-centered ministry. To achieve this mission, flexibility is essential. We must have the agility to adapt our physical space to meet evolving ministry needs including the following:

- **Potential partnership or merger.** As Bishop, I must plan for resource-sharing across 80 churches. A merger with a sister congregation could pool staff and programs—but merging into the Sharpnack site is unworkable because of parking constraints (see below).
- **Pastoral events now imperiled.**
 - **Funerals:** Hearse and limousines struggle to stage; mourners circle blocks, arriving late or giving up.
 - **Weddings & revival services:** Double-parking triggers neighborhood strain—hardly a joyous witness.
- Binding designation would prevent us from enlarging or replacing the structure to address them.

4 | Changing Community & Site Limitations

The surrounding neighborhood has changed dramatically in recent decades, including increased residential density and a chronic shortage of accessible parking. These and other conditions, described below, impose meaningful constraints on congregational growth.

- **Wave of new town-houses.** Since 2021, two infill projects—59-75 E. Sharpnack (8 units) and 80 E. Sharpnack (11 units)—have introduced three-story, fiber-cement-clad homes with rooftop decks, private garages, and curb cuts. A third permit for six more units is pending two parcels east of the church.
- **Density spike, parking plunge.** Those 25 new dwellings have added roughly 50 vehicles to a one-block stretch while removing curb space for their driveways. Guests arriving for funerals, weddings and other high-capacity events, now circle for 15–20 minutes, often parking on Germantown Avenue and walking back uphill.
- **Architectural mismatch.** Our Wissahickon-schist chapel is now bracketed by modern boxes. Preserving the church “in situ” as a lone relic, without addressing functionality, risks isolating it visually and operationally while the street continues to modernize.
- **Tax & demographic pressure.** Recent sales of these town-houses exceed \$450,000 each, raising land values and property taxes.

5 | Good-Faith Commemorative Alternative

There are multiple alternative arrangements to achieve the Commission’s goal of preserving the Grace Baptist/Wright legacy without unduly burdening Sanctuary Church. The options below offer robust public education at zero cost to the city and without jeopardizing ministry.

1. **Bronze sidewalk plaque** recounting the church’s history—from Grace Baptist’s founding through COGIC stewardship—drafted with Commission staff and local historians.
2. **QR-code “Heritage Stop”** linking to digitized Wright sermons, photographs, and oral histories.
3. **Annual Wright Legacy Day**, hosted at Grace Baptist’s present campus, celebrating African-American faith leadership.
4. **Grant-funded archival project** to digitize Grace Baptist and COGIC records for the Germantown Historical Society.

6 | Conclusion & Request

Historic preservation succeeds when living communities thrive within their heritage. The proposed designation threatens a congregation already carrying significant financial strain, unable to absorb tripled repair costs, and constrained by a site that cannot support parking for funerals, weddings, or any future merger. Simultaneously, the nomination omits half a century of

history. We therefore respectfully ask the Commission to deny designation. If additional study is desired, we urge a continuance without interim controls, allowing the full post-1968 record to be documented.

Let the church be the church—preserving history through partnership, not a costly and oppressive regime that risks bankruptcy and vacancy. We stand ready to collaborate on the commemorative plan outlined above and appreciate the Commission’s thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Guy Glimp

Bishop Guy Glimp

Jurisdictional Bishop, Church of God in Christ – Pennsylvania

On behalf of Sanctuary Church of God in Christ