

Church Split Leaves Angelus Temple in Limbo

Rancor over renovating the famed Angelus Temple in Los Angeles has triggered a serious church split and caused dissidents to file a lawsuit that has halted construction and put the church's future in limbo.

The 5,500-seat church was built in 1923 by Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Pastor Ed Stanton, who had planned to alleviate the building's acoustical and lighting problems, began renovations in May that would have flattened the church's domed ceiling and covered a 40-foot mural of Jesus.

Church members who were outraged at the building plans formed the Coalition to Save Angelus Temple. For years the building served as headquarters for the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (ICFG), but today those offices are located across the street. Noting that the building is a national historic landmark, the coalition filed the lawsuit to stop construction. A judge agreed and revoked the building permit.

Coalition members charged that renovating the sanctuary was akin to

repainting the ceiling of the Sistine chapel in Rome. They noted the church's storied history of McPherson's Depression era feeding programs and healing services, which often attracted Hollywood stars including Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin.

Stanton said attendance at Angelus Temple has declined for 20 years, and his plan to take the gospel to an “emerging generation” could not be met using a building he said was so poorly lighted members could not read their Bibles. “All of us should be willing to sacrifice in order for them to come to know Christ,” he said.

With the seats removed, construction halted and the sanctuary in disarray, Stanton has moved one of his two Sunday services to an auditorium previously reserved for Spanish services. He is starting another Sunday service in a hotel in nearby Pasadena.

“They say the place is sacred,” Stanton said. “Well, I’m here for the people—not the place. People are not meant to serve places.”

—Ed Donnally in Los Angeles