

Interview with Rev. Dr. Renee McKenzie, Vicar for the Church of the Advocate and Chaplain to Temple University Campus Ministry

Dr. McKenzie received her Master's and Doctoral degrees from Temple University. I met with her to hear her thoughts about the neighborhood community's opinions regarding the prospect of Temple's building a football stadium in North Philadelphia.

Paul LaFollette (PL): What are your thoughts about the prospect a football stadium in this neighborhood?

Renee McKenzie (RM): I am both an alum and a community leader. For me, the greatest insult is the lack of regard that I see coming from Temple's administration to the community. It's ok to want to have a stadium, I can understand that from an institutional perspective. But I think that you also need to acknowledge where you place Temple's stadium matters, and that it is going to have some impact on people. For me it's just common decency to engage in conversation with the people in your neighborhood. Those kinds of conversations should have been taking place before any thoughts about a stadium arose.

My sense is that from the time that President Theobald arrived, he has not engaged the community in any kind of conversation. When he first came, he had a five or a seven point plan. He presented it to the Philadelphia Alumni Chapter. It was all internal to Temple University. There was nothing about community engagement. There was no recognition that Temple exists in the heart of North Philadelphia, a community with its own rich cultural heritage. When I asked him about that in a question and answer session, he responded that he is not surrounded by people who have that as a concern and so this was not a part of his awareness. But then later, I have not seen any recognition on his part that he needs to have that kind of engagement. I just think that all of these little insults have led up to this final point of community exasperation which is now being expressed in reaction to this stadium.

We have students living in our community. I know that not all student housing is under the control of Temple University, but it is being done *for* Temple University, so there should be some kind of responsibility. These frustrations all seem to have come together at this point around the stadium, so the community finally found its voice around this. I don't think that they are going to lose it.

We don't know what the outcome is going to be about this stadium, but we do know that there are going to be parking issues. Even if the University says "We have 10,000 parking spaces," that is not going to accommodate a 35,000 seat stadium. The truth is, a lot of the fans are going to want to park on the streets, they are not going to want to pay for parking. We just know that's how people are. That will have an impact beyond the immediate radius of that 15th and Norris location.

We are already dealing with trash, and some of the students already disrespect or disregard the fact that they live in a residential community – that they are not just surrounded by their frat brothers and sisters. You have to live a particular way if you are living in a residential community. So, there are already trash issues. There are noise issues.

I know that part of the selling plan for the University is the argument that there will be retail shops as a part of the stadium complex. Will these involve living wage jobs? Will this really employ the community in a significant way? For me, there are just too many questions still. We want to know that we are having an honest conversation, and it is wrong to have brought the community to the table after the fact.

PL: Well, of course, that is exactly how the faculty feel as well – that it is wrong to bring the faculty to the table after the decisions have been made. Actually, we are still waiting to be invited to the table. But I think it is perhaps even worse not to have engaged the community earlier. One thing that I worry about is that I have seen the behavior of some, not all, of our students as they leave the Linc after a game. It is not something that I would want in my neighborhood.

RM: They can be rowdy. I don't know if you have seen the video *This is Our Neighborhood*. It was done by some students, and it talks about Temple and North Philadelphia. They showed one clip of some Temple students who were trying to tip over one of the university buses. Rowdiness is what students do sometimes. But there needs to be some sensitivity to that sort of thing, an awareness of where they are.

The other thing is that for me, this is not good news for Temple students' educational dollars. It doesn't make sense to me that Temple will be able to pay for this year after year. It is not as if Temple has had a stellar football program for years and years. That is not the tradition of this University, and even if it was, will a 35,000 seat stadium pay for itself? I don't know. I don't see this as being a good idea, but we don't have all the facts.

PL: And it is unfortunate that we don't have all the facts because, as you said before, they could have been talking with the community and with the faculty and with other stakeholders before moving so far along with the process. I really do believe that this is a decision that has already been made and is now simply being sold.

RM: I have never seen people on the west side of Broad Street, in this area, to be so incensed. The residents are up in arms, because they just don't know. And Temple has not proved itself to be trustworthy. And that is the saddest part. That is the part that hurts me as an alum.

I have yet been able to get in to talk with President Theobald. I have called his office. I have emailed him. Even after he made a statement at the alumni meeting that his door was always open to alumni, I contacted him and he basically said that it didn't mean me. I hope that this is a reflection of the fact that I am already here on campus as Chaplain to Temple, so maybe there is nothing he needs to tell me. I love this university, so I find all of this very disturbing.

PL: Well, for a number of reasons, I also have very warm feelings for this university, but I feel as if it is now going off in directions that are very different from what I found when I first came here, and it is happening without any real discussion.

RM: I have not been here as long as you, but I find the current situation very unfortunate. I've been at the Church of the Advocate for four years, and one of the things I hoped to do was to help the Advocate play the role as a bridge between Temple and the community. Historically, that is what this church has been. This is a place where people gather, and I would like to see this as a place that can bring people together. It happens on the level of faculty. It happens on the level of student and community engagement. But the administrative piece, which sets the tone for everything else, it feels like we are either fighting against it, or working with it, but we are not talking to it.

PL: I want to thank you for meeting with me, and for your thoughts. As I had explained to you, I am devoting much of our issue to the stadium, and it would not be complete without some thoughtful comments from our neighbors. ♦



Rev. McKenzie speaks to protestors of the new stadium gathered outside Sullivan Hall.
Photo by Brianna Spause, The Temple News