

New life for old church buildings: Acceptable transitions

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Dozens of children chattered with excitement in a space where the faithful of the former Heights United Presbyterian Church once raised their voices in worship. The pews were gone, and the sanctuary had become a youth-club basketball court in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

Overseeing the gathering was not a preacher but a former basketball player surrounded by kids eager to have a place to play on a warm summer day.

What has not been lost in the transition is a sense of purpose and energy—some would even say mission—in this old brick building.

“I can’t think of a better way if the church could not make it there than to develop a program that would make young people’s lives better,” said Louise Westfall, pastor of nearby Fairmount Presbyterian Church. “That seems to me to be very sacred work.”

If only all closed churches could do so well in their next lives.

The issue of what to do with former sanctuaries is a growing concern for mainstream churches in the heartland and across the nation. Massive population shifts to the suburbs are leaving behind financially struggling churches with dwindling membership in the cities and inner-ring suburbs.

For example, over the next year and a half the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland will consider whether to close or merge more than 45 of its 231 parishes.

Church leaders from all denominations find themselves balancing the desire to have the buildings used for continued ministry with more practical considerations, such as receiving a high sale price. In a few cases, the buildings are in such disrepair that they must be razed. In most cases, the buildings will be sold or transferred to another church. But there have also been many instances of imaginative

conversions, in which the original building is preserved as an architectural jewel in the neighborhood so the structure can serve the community as, for example, municipal offices, business space, an arts complex or housing.

Continuing the legacy of a building that for decades served as a spiritual beacon is important, particularly for people grieving the loss of their church, religious leaders say.

Members of a closed church consider it “sacred space given by their ancestors, and they’d like to see it continue as sacred space,” said Daniel Drew, who oversees local church mergers for the United Methodist Church.

In the Catholic Church as in other traditions, the first preference is that a closed building continue to serve a religious purpose, said Ralph Wiatrowski, pastor of St. Barnabas Catholic Church in Northfield, Ohio, and former Cleveland diocesan chancellor.

No Episcopal church will end up as an adult bookstore, said Patricia Hanen, assistant to the Ohio diocese’s bishop for congregational development. “We’re very particular about” selling closed churches, Hanen said. The church wants the building to be “some kind of asset to another religious group or the community at large.”

In the case of the Heights Youth Club, Fairmount Presbyterian Church raised \$100,000, matching a \$100,000 challenge grant, to help create a nonprofit corporation to buy the former Heights United Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights. The club, which opened in January, offers summer and after-school activities promoting education, recreation and the arts.

Although the youth club is a secular program operated by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Cleveland, it fits with church goals of nurturing young people, Westfall said.

Among others, artists have found inspiration in closed churches. St. Josaphat Catholic Church in Cleveland, which closed in 1998, is now Josaphat Arts Hall. “It’s still a spiritual place, because art is spiritual,” said owner Kathleen Manhattan. “And it’s alive. It’s alive with people. It’s alive with ideas.”

Even selling to a developer does not necessarily mean that the building will be torn down or dramatically altered.

When developer Josh Simon purchased First English Lutheran Church after it closed in 2002, he preserved many of its aesthetic features, including classic archways, stained-glass windows and heavy wooden beams, when he converted the building to townhouses.

Debbie Harris, who owns the unit where the church altar once stood, kept the more than 15-foot-tall stained-glass window of Jesus surrounded by sheep. "When you wake up in the morning, Jesus is looking down on you," she said. "It's a very peaceful feeling." -*David Briggs, Religion News Service*