The fixer-upper church: Ministry on the margins

by Lydie Raschka in the April 8, 2008 issue

When I go to church these days, I have to walk on makeshift sidewalks alongside walls of plywood boards that surround a construction area, and underneath heavy-duty scaffolding that juts out over the building's front steps and up to the base of the steeple. When Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church was built by German immigrants 100 years ago, it stood alone on the block; now luxury condominiums are boxing us in.

A preservationist says it will cost $8 million to repair our church, give or take a million. The stained glass windows have already been removed because of the danger of breakage during the construction next door. The steeple alone, leaning to one side, will cost over a million to repair. "It's a substantial building," the preservationist said when he delivered the news. Sometimes I curse this substantial building as an albatross, a black hole, a money pit.

And yet . . . if you look beyond the leaking roof, the rattraps in the entryway and the dirty dishes in the sink you will find a Spanish worship service attended by Mexican immigrants who struggle with poverty, lack of health care and a strange new language. Bilingual worship services provide a bridge between this group and those in the English-speaking service, while a transitional shelter softens the trauma of being homeless for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth who have been rejected by their families. These youth bring all their baggage in with them; we offer them cots, food and Metro cards.

At one point, when we asked the developer next door to help us protect our stained glass windows from the vibrations caused by his work, he insinuated that our work could be used against us: "What would the neighborhood think if they knew about the undesirables who hang out here?"

In my 16 years here, the church has always been a fixer-upper. We've patched the boiler, the bathroom walls and ceilings, and the kitchen floor. We've plugged rat

holes with cement, dragged out leaf-filled gutters and climbed the rickety old tower when water was raining down inside it.

“This is creepy,” a friend said on seeing our church for the first time. She walked gingerly down the dungeon-like stairs and through the protective gate we use as an entrance during the week. (We cannot keep the front doors open because of safety concerns and lack of personnel.) The building *is* creepy—and, many would add, dangerous. Doing ministry in such a building can be dangerous too. We once found a condom in the choir room on Sunday morning—where toddlers gather for donuts and play after Wee Worship. Our situation sounds like a tabloid headline: sexually promiscuous teens and babies in close proximity under falling steeple!

But in spite of the drawbacks and potential danger, Trinity is where my husband and I found spiritual respite years ago. I was struggling in a new job in a new city when we hit a crisis: our apartment ceiling caved in. We had tried other churches, but this one, with its small, social justice–minded congregation, felt right. The church provided a bigger picture, helping us overcome our personal struggles. And like our lives, it was an unpolished, unfinished kind of place. In those first years my husband was at church every Saturday helping to rake, paint and repair.

Church development people wring their hands and talk about “welcoming” facades and “friendly” signs. Our front gates may be locked during the week, but our youth slip in easily at night, and Mexican immigrants gather for parties in the basement on weekends to escape sardine-packed living quarters. After a party, they share delicious tortillas with our homeless youth: a smiling, dark-haired woman hands hot food to a willowy boy-becoming-a-girl and receives a huge smile in return.

Would we be as welcoming of those on the margins if ours were a fixed-up space instead of a fixer-upper? We’d certainly like to try, although comfort and security bring their own challenges. Our congregation is growing, but it might not grow big enough in time to raise the millions of dollars that we need. In that case, the church will have to come down and be reconfigured into a different kind of space. “It’s not about the building,” I reason. Practically speaking, some churches are done in by their large, ornate buildings anyway. Instead, our building plan is about saving a ministry that has meaning for an increasing number of people in the city.

At night I remember how I held my son’s tiny head over the baptismal font etched with German words; how I woke at dawn after a night volunteering with the shelter, stretching my physical and spiritual muscles in the sanctuary; how our family

gathered to hear a sermon after my father-in-law’s sudden death. It is in this old church, with its crumbling terra cotta tiles—a fixer-upper on its last legs—that we trace our lives.