

Historic Los Angeles church, once an activist hub, seeks new life

César Chávez once preached at the church, which supported Chicano civil rights organizers. But the church wants to do more than preserve its past.

by [Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil](#) in the [January 2, 2019](#) issue



César Chávez preaching at the Church of the Epiphany in Los Angeles in the 1960s. Photo by Nancy Tovar.

Carlos Muñoz Jr. spent much of his youth at Church of the Epiphany, an Episcopal parish in the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Lincoln Heights. But he's not—and has never been—Episcopalian.

An organizer with the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s, Muñoz and other student leaders held meetings at the church. It was there that Muñoz planned the 1968 student walkouts, the first major mobilization of Mexican Americans in Southern California, in which tens of thousands of high school students left their classrooms to protest racism and unequal conditions in their schools.

Mexican American activists also met at the church to plan protests of the Vietnam War, start a bilingual newspaper about movement activities, and form the Brown Berets, a group modeled after the Black Panthers. The building served as the East Los Angeles campaign headquarters for Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign and the Los Angeles base for labor leader César Chávez and the United Farm Workers.

"No matter what time of the day, what time of the night it was, we'd say, 'Father Luce, can we come?'" Muñoz said of John Luce, one of the church's pastors at the time. "And he'd say, 'Sure, the door's always open.' The church was very important to us."

Now, 50 years later, Church of the Epiphany is embarking on a nearly \$1 million effort to restore the 130-year-old building so that its history can be preserved for future generations and so that it can once again be a meeting place for activist youth. In October the church—the oldest sustained Episcopal congregation in the city and a designated Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument—won \$150,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Partners in Preservation campaign to put toward the project.

"The church should be remembered for the role it played in the development of the civil rights movement for Mexican Americans in this country and the struggles we waged to make better schools for Mexican American children," said Muñoz, professor emeritus of ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Church of the Epiphany was built in 1887 in what was then a white, middle-class suburb of Los Angeles, said Tom Carey, the current pastor of the church.

“It was basically a run-of-the-mill Episcopal Church until the 1950s,” he said.

After World War II, Mexican Americans began moving into the neighborhood, and by the 1960s Church of the Epiphany had become Spanish-speaking, with no English worship services. The church then brought in three white priests, John Luce, Roger Wood, and Oliver Garver, who had backgrounds in community organizing—and a desire to show solidarity with the Mexican Americans in their parish and the surrounding neighborhood.

At the time, Mexican Americans faced rampant discrimination, particularly in schools, Muñoz said. Students were not allowed to speak Spanish and were often barred from taking the science and math classes necessary to apply for college. Instead, they were diverted into trade schools, which also meant they were eligible for the military draft.

Inspired by the civil rights leaders in the South, Mexican American youth in Los Angeles started organizing mass protests and demonstrations. But one difference between the two movements was that African Americans had the backing of the black church, Muñoz said.

“We had no support to speak of from the Catholic Church at that time,” he said.

Church of the Epiphany filled this gap, providing not only the space but also the support Mexican American youth needed to plan the Chicano civil rights movement.

“Nobody complained that a bunch of Chicano and Civil Rights activists were hanging around there planning to raise hell about what was going on in the schools,” he said.

The church also pioneered the incorporation of Mexican American culture into the liturgy, Carey said. Church of the Epiphany held mariachi masses, Spanish-language services with traditional mariachi instruments; decorated the sanctuary with *papel picado* (perforated paper), a form of Mexican folk art; and served Mexican dishes at church events.

But in the decades since, as members of the congregation moved out of the neighborhood and new parishioners stopped showing up, Church of the Epiphany fell into disrepair.

When Carey started working at the church in 2010, the stained-glass windows were falling out, the roof was leaking, and the front wall of the parish hall was falling down. There was no heating, and the electrical system needed to be updated.

“All this was in ruin,” he said.

Using a historic structural report funded by the Getty Conservation Institute that his predecessor had commissioned, Carey and the Epiphany Conservation Trust raised money to fund the repairs. They received donations from the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles and the church hosted two charity art auctions to bring in money from the wider Southern California community.

Preservation of the church is important not only for its history but for its architectural value, said Ravi GuneWardena, one of the preservation architects for the church.

The building features a hybrid of architectural styles, including Romanesque, Gothic Revival, and Mission Revival, and some of the details on the building are also influenced by Spanish and southwestern style, he said. The sanctuary’s architect, Arthur Benton, designed other Southern California landmarks, including the Mission Inn in Riverside and the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse.

“It’s of great value to have buildings that are more than 100 years old in Los Angeles at all,” said GuneWardena. “This is one of the few that survived.”

So far the church has been able to fix most of its immediate structural issues, Carey said. But now Church of the Epiphany is embarking on a capital campaign with the nonprofit Partners for Sacred Places to do even more, including modernizing the basement, where the Mexican American youth activists once met. (The grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation will go to this campaign.)

While the bilingual congregation has continued to serve the immigrant community—such as through helping renters who are being pushed out of their apartments—Carey said that the church can once again become an activist hub for young people by installing an elevator and creating new meeting spaces in the basement.

“I want to partner with organizations so we can train young activists, not only in how to organize, but also in what to read, if your writing skills need honing how to do

that, to do dance and movement, how to put theater at the service of this work,” he said. “The main value of the landmark status and everything else is to remember that this is an integral part of the American heritage, which is to protest injustice. We’re more than just a pretty building.”

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