

CHURCHES CONVERT TO PAY THE BILLS

Houses of worship see new life as seniors' housing, daycares

When parishioners of The Meeting House gather for Sunday service each week, they don't sit in pews in some grand historic church.



FRED CHARTRAND/THE CANADIAN PRESS Leanne Moussa teamed up with other local residents buy Ottawa's All Saints Anglican Church. The building is a community hub as well as a part time mosque and synagogue.

Instead, their place of worship is an auditorium with a big screen, arcade games and popcorn.

Jared Taylor said holding church service in a movie theatre makes sense for the 30-year-old parish because it has allowed it to remain flexible while serving a growing congregation.

Instead of paying rent or building a new structure, it has been able to show worshippers that a church can be anywhere.

“Our motto has been ‘Church for people who aren't into church,’” said Taylor, communications pastor with the Oakville, Ont.,-based group. “We like having a neutral space that doesn't feel like a church. It can be less threatening for some people.”

Three decades later, The Meeting House has grown from the 78 parishioners who attended the group's first service to more than 5,000 who now gather at 18 locations across Ontario each week.

Although its headquarters eventually found a home in a renovated former auto parts factory, its satellite locations still mostly operate out of movie theatres, schools, community centres and even people's homes.

Declining congregations and climbing maintenance costs have added to the financial troubles some churches have had to deal with over the past few years. It's led some to come up with creative alternative uses to keep their churches financially sound.

Rev. Karen Hamilton, general secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches, which bills itself as the largest ecumenical group in Canada, says there are a number of examples across the country where crumbling church buildings have been converted into bustling venues — with or without their original religious purpose.

Churches have been turned into seniors' housing complexes, condominium towers, daycares, concert halls and wedding event spaces. Some have even been converted into residential homes.

“What people have become aware of, which is great stewardship, is that these are great buildings that offer great spaces and facilities and should be used all the time,” said Hamilton. “Churches should not be sitting empty. They can be busy, active, interesting, fun places all day long.”

The idea of turning her local Ottawa church into a community hub was at the forefront of Leanne Moussa's mind when the building went up for sale two years ago.

With a group of other residents, Moussa paid \$1.52 million for All Saints Anglican Church, once the site of the state funeral for Prime Minister Robert Borden.

“We had a real interest in preserving what we see as an important place of Canadian history, and preserving that as a public space in some way,” she said. “We think this building and this property has served some important functions, not just for the congregation but for the larger community.”

Once the renovations and repairs are complete, the church will be home to a coffee shop, a wedding event space and meeting rooms for book launches, art shows and activist groups. Eventually, the church's lower hall will be turned into a permanent restaurant.

Moussa, who is not religious, notes that All Saints is still a home of worship for smaller faith-based groups. It's used as a mosque on Friday, a synagogue on Saturday and a church to two Christian groups on Sunday. It's also a destination for tango and yoga classes nearly every night of the week.

“Our business plan is focused on being a financially viable project that continues to serve the community and we think we can do both,” she said. “We want to continue to engage the community.”