
New Dollars/New Partners Success Story

Christ Church Lutheran, Minneapolis, Minnesota



Christ Church Lutheran, situated in the residential Longfellow neighborhood.

Photo Courtesy of Pete Sieger

Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis, Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen's final work, is a series of bold rectangular shapes and expanses of hand-finished brick and wood, masterfully manipulated to create perfect acoustics and a sense of serenity. Modernist buildings like Christ Church Lutheran are experiencing their first phase of major repair and restoration campaigns, with few precedents as to the proper course of action. Thus, the congregation of this 1949 religious building turned to Partners for Sacred Places for assistance.

Christ Church Lutheran's congregation fastidiously maintains the building, but the congregation linked with Partners to establish long-term plans for stewardship. "We look at the building as something that our forefathers, the older generation, gave us with such forward thinking," states Mary Bode, an active member of the Christ Church

Lutheran Preservation Committee, "We need to fully respect that."

The congregation graduated from Partners' *New Dollars/New Partners for Your Sacred Place* training program, co-sponsored by the Minneapolis Area Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2006, and has since hired a preservation architect to conduct a master plan. Christ Church Lutheran's pastor, The Rev. Kristine Carlson, shares, "Partners for Sacred Places' engaging with the organization and taking part in the guided study helped involve more members of the congregation, so it was not only the pastor carrying (the stewardship of the building). It brought more leadership."

Building A Relationship with the City and the Neighbors

The congregation is building a relationship with the community and the city to engage the younger generation. Mayor R. T. Rybak has visited the church, and the neighborhood association refers to the building as the "gem of the Longfellow neighborhood." Bode shares, "If you were to ask the mayor, he would support us in any endeavors because of what Partners has taught us. If a building crumbles in a neighborhood, so does the neighborhood."

The congregation's goal is to inform the greater community of Christ Church's presence and unique history. "Christ Church Lutheran made a splash when it was first constructed, but since then it's been very modest," Carlson shares. "Part of our mission is for every Lutheran in the Twin Cities to know that Christ Church Lutheran exists and that it is a remarkable treasure for the Lutheran church. We want to do the same thing for the art & architectural community... There's a lot of work to be done in that area."

A Vibrant Arts and Architecture Community

Christ Church Lutheran is active in the community, hosting gymnasium nights, Finnish language classes, and senior citizen activities for its neighbors. A pre-school has been operating for 35 years in the education wing that Saarinen's son, Eero, designed to complement his father's work. Eero Saarinen also designed a simple courtyard with a central fountain. The courtyard has the sense of a cloister, with an open colonnade on one side and interior corridors on two others. Steve Wilmot of SMSQ Architects, Inc. comments that the courtyard is deferential to the church. "It's more on the side of a meditative courtyard... A big part of Eero's addition was having ways to look at the original church across the courtyard. It was part of the original Eliel church design intent."

In addition to Christ Church Lutheran's active ministries and community programs, the congregation has established a relationship with local museums. It is in discussion with the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) and the Walker Art Center to showcase the church as part of an international retrospective on Eero Saarinen in 2008. Additionally, this fall Partners is conducting a field session featuring Christ Church Lutheran during the National Preservation Conference in the Twin Cities this October.

This relationship with the arts community has also benefited church membership. When the congregation began training its docents, it was pleased to discover that half of the 40 interested individuals were non-members. Among them were docents from MIA, who had heard about Christ Church Lutheran as a result of the upcoming Saarinen exhibit. Two of those docents are now

attending worship services, leading Carlson to realize, “Partners is helping us see the building more and more as a tool for (growth) too.”

The congregation also conducts tours for classes at local colleges and universities, as well as Luther Seminary in St. Paul. As a bonus, management of the docents and tours is now a responsibility that engages a new congregation member in a position of leadership.

This exposure is not new to Christ Church Lutheran, but the congregation is now harnessing the attention for outreach and fundraising efforts. Partners helped the congregation draft a fundraising case statement, introduced capital campaign advisors to assist with marketing, and encouraged relationships with local politicians. Bode shares, “I think Partners is helping us understand ourselves better in the world of architecture and of sacred places.”

The congregation also hopes to expand its circle by inviting the community into the courtyard for recreational events and movie nights, or hosting art programming for neighbors. Bode laughs, “We’ve already got the art! If we could be a place where we could have arts programs for children and a gallery for adults, people could come in to the church through a nonreligious way. Then maybe they would also find us helpful and necessary at a time when maybe they need some spiritual guidance.”

Restoring a Modern Building

Christ Church Lutheran is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is being nominated for National Historic Landmark status. The American Institute of Architects also recognized Christ Church Lutheran with the prestigious Twenty-Five Year award. “It is such a remarkable building; it’s so simple, and the scale of it is small -- it’s not a campus or a skyscraper,” marvels Wilmot. “It is one of the buildings that are so well done but so humble and accessible. It is an honor to work on it.”

Margaret Virum, Christ Church Lutheran’s archivist, was a high school student at the time the building was constructed. She still lives across the street from the building, and recalls that neighbors and would visit and ask

questions like, “What kind of a factory are they building?” or “When are they going to put hay in that barn?” Virum explains, “We really weren’t used to modern architecture. We were wondering just what it was going to be and not realizing how wonderful it was going to be.”

Though Christ Church Lutheran and its education building have been well maintained, Carlson admits that the congregation felt it needed outside advice as the buildings approached the 50-year mark. “It’s been a big help to me, Partners for Sacred Places, coming into a new situation,” expresses Carlson, who was installed as pastor in November of 2006. “I’ve never served a congregation that is so architecturally significant as this church, it’s a really rare place. To know that there are people whose specialty this is, it is such a huge help to all of us. Not only in how to preserve an architectural treasure like this, but to have an ongoing ministry. It’s not a museum, it’s a church.”

The congregation hired SMSQ to update the church facilities without disrupting its architectural integrity. An accessible, family-friendly restroom has been installed on the first level in the education wing, on the same floor as the sanctuary.

During the building evaluation, however, Wilmot discovered water drainage issues in the tower. Bricks are absorbing moisture from precipitation rather than funneling the rain and snow through Saarinen’s drainage system. The bricks are exhibiting efflorescence, there is slight damage to the pipes, and birds are nesting in the tower. Carlson plans to continue making the entrances to the building and courtyard handicap accessible once the tower issues are fixed. “Since these are architecturally significant pieces of the building, they have to be handled with care.”

Additionally, it is considering upgrading the church and the education wing with air-conditioning, in order to encourage the community use of the wing in the summer.

“That’s one of the challenges, I think with a historically significant building, especially a church,” Carlson explains. “As much as I love the stories from the past, it’s equally important to have hope and strong vision and stories that captivate us for the future, for itself and for the ministry.”



Neighbors and congregation members attending Christ Church Lutheran’s 1949 dedication ceremony.

Photo Courtesy of Christ Church Lutheran archives

If you have questions about the *New Dollars/New Partners* program or an interest in bringing it to your community, please contact Elizabeth Terry, Director of Training, at 215-567-3234, ext. 19 or eterry@sacredplaces.org.