

GIVING AND FUND RAISING

This Old House of the Lord

A Philadelphia charity helps save deteriorating religious buildings

By Lee Burnett



JIM GRAHAM, FOR THE CHRONICLE

A. Robert Jaeger, of Partners for Sacred Places, says that most American houses of worship fill social-service and other roles for their neighborhoods, serving as “de facto community centers.” His group helps congregations draw on these ties for fund raising.

The grand stone building that houses Calvary United Methodist Church had stood at 48th Street and Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia since 1906. But by the early 1990s, it had fallen into disrepair, and the church’s membership had shrunk to a few dozen. Overwhelmed by responsibilities and weak finances, church leaders reluctantly decided to sell their historic home and start over, in a cheaper place.

But the church didn’t sell in three years on the market, even at a discounted price of \$300,000. What’s more, the neighborhood erupted in protest when church leaders decided to sell Calvary’s Tiffany stained-glass skylight domes.

“It was just bleak, very bleak,” recalls Ed Fell, the church’s part-time administrator.

It all could have ended very badly were it not for the involvement of Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia non-

Fund-raising lessons from Partners for Sacred Places

- Learn the story of the local institution that needs support.
- Tell that story widely, and look for connections between it and the community it serves.
- With the help of outside supporters, think creatively about how the institution can serve more people.

organizations. The new partnership not only enabled Calvary United Methodist to stay put, but also gave rise to a capital campaign that is halfway toward its \$2-million goal.

“I think what we’ve achieved is beyond our wildest expectations,” says Richard Kirk, a member of the Methodist congregation who spearheaded the formation of a separate nonprofit corporation to run the new Calvary Center and organize its efforts to raise money from secular sources.

Calvary’s turnaround was engineered by following the same advice Partners gives to all 400 congregations that have received its fund-raising training: Discover the house of worship’s strengths and build on them in a way that supports its mission. Calvary’s assets were its own energetic congregation; its location in a young, growing, ethnically diverse neighborhood; and its beautiful building, most notably its soaring stained-glass windows.

“At times, I wondered if we weren’t crazy for doing it,” says Mr. Kirk. “I guess it was a leap of faith.”

He adds, “You just start plowing. You don’t worry that the field is 17 football fields in size.”

Building Bridges

Partners for Sacred Places—which itself runs on the \$2.1-million it raises each year from foundation grants, income from training sessions, membership fees, and individual donations—grew out of a more divisive era, typified by the battle in the late 1980s over St. Bartholomew’s Church, on Park Avenue in New York. Back then, the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission fought the church’s plans to build a 59-story office building cantilevered over the church’s tile-pattern dome. The church said it needed the office building to finance church repairs and programs. The city eventually prevailed when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review the case in 1991. The symbolism of an isolated church pitted against the community and preservationists bothered people like A. Robert Jaeger and Diane Cohen.

In the late 1980s, Ms. Cohen and Mr. Jaeger both worked for historic-preservation charities: she for the New York

profit organization that teaches religious congregations how to identify outside supporters and sources of money in order to save endangered historic buildings. Partners invited church leaders and neighbors to work together on the future of the church building.

The result was the creation of the Calvary Center for Culture and Community, a multipurpose community center in the church that houses six congregations, a theater group, and several other

Landmarks Conservancy and he for the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation. They believed that too many churches took for granted the historical and architectural significance of their buildings. They also believed lawsuits were not the way to protect these treasures from neglect and, in some cases, modernization.

“Clearly, there was a need for a national bridge-building organization,” says Mr. Jaeger, whose interest in religious properties grew out of his love for stained-glass windows.

The two founded Partners for Sacred Places in 1989 to show that preservation and community development could go hand in hand with congregations’ need to grow. Key to this was showing that most historic houses of worship are not isolated retreats but vital community centers, whose viability is threatened by deteriorating building conditions.

Nearly a decade after starting the group, Ms. Cohen and Mr. Jaeger co-wrote a report that represented a distillation of their group’s mission. It documented that aging houses of worship provided valuable services, often free, while facing extraordinary deferred maintenance costs of their own.

“Sacred Places at Risk,” a 1997 survey of 111 pre-1940s churches and synagogues in six cities, showed that nine out of 10 houses of worship in America open their doors to their neighbors for such uses as soup kitchens, preschools, and self-help groups, and that eight out of 10 people who use church space during the week are not church members.

Collectively, the donation of meeting space, staff time, support services, and outright donations represented an average value to the community of \$140,000 per year, according to the study. At the same time, the average church or synagogue faced imminent repair expenses averaging \$225,000.

“No one had ever demonstrated who these people were or paused to see how churches were used,” says Mr. Jaeger. “They were in fact de facto community centers.”

In the 19 years since the organization was founded, it has provided formal training to 400 congregations, he says, and

About Partners for Sacred Places

History: Founded in 1989 with money from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, and others.

Where it operates: In addition to its Philadelphia headquarters, the organization opened a regional office in Fort Worth in 2006 and is soon to open another in Chicago.

Purpose: To finance the preservation of older religious properties by teaching congregations of all denominations how to put their buildings into more active community use and how to find supporters beyond those who belong to the church or temple.

Annual budget: \$2.1-million

Annual salary of chief executive: \$96,000

Key officials: A. Robert Jaeger, executive director; Diane Cohen, senior director of institutional planning and development

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provided services of some kind to several thousand others. The training consists of instruction on conducting building-condition assessments, calculating the public value of a church or temple, and waging a capital campaign.

'It's Their Home'

While standard capital campaigns by religious congregations raise money primarily from people who belong to those churches or synagogues, institutions that follow the Partners model raise two-thirds of the money from sources outside the congregation—including foundations, individuals, and government grants, says Mr. Jaeger.

In some cases, finding local supporters may be obvious. Christ Church Lutheran, in Minneapolis, for example, receives many visitors because the church was designed by the Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen and the church's education wing was designed by his son Eero Saarinen. So, church leaders planning a multimillion-dollar capital campaign were intending to reach out to people of Finnish descent and architecture fans, even before they took the Partners for Sacred Places training, says Mary Bode, a member of Christ Church Lutheran. "That part was not new to us because we already knew who our visitors are," she says.

Still, Ms. Bode says, the training was helpful in its thoroughness. "You have to think about things very intentionally," she says. "That's what I like."

Following the training, she notes, Christ Church Lutheran realized its members lacked the expertise to run a capital campaign themselves and will probably hire a consultant.

Druid Hills Presbyterian Church, in Atlanta, like Christ Church Lutheran, was aware of potential supporters because it also plays host to an emergency shelter and a children's health center used by non-church members. Partners training helped church members locate foundations that support those services through grants.

"It's very difficult to get grant money if you're a church," says Ron Miller, a Druid Hills member. Partners, he adds, "helped us be successful. We probably would have tried to find grants, but we wouldn't have been as rigorous."

Following the Partners training, Druid Hills hired a consultant to conduct a study to determine how much it could raise in a capital campaign. Church members concluded they had the internal expertise to conduct such a campaign themselves



This stained-glass dome, in Philadelphia's Calvary United Methodist Church, was purchased by a Chicago collector who gave it back to the congregation.

BILL MARR

"Many congregations are passionately interested in their space. For spiritual reasons. For financial reasons. Because, really, it's their home."

and managed to raise \$1.2-million, which was about \$400,000 to \$500,000 more than the consultant had said was feasible.

"The training alerted us that we needed to do more getting involved with the community and meeting community leaders," Mr. Miller says.

Partners teaches congregations to see their building not as a money pit to be resented but as an underutilized asset that could be opened to wider uses serving the church's mission, says Luther K. Snow, a strategic-planning consultant who works with the organization.

"Partners has figured out a hook for congregational renewal," says Mr. Snow.

"Denominations all over the country have spent a lot of energy, time, and effort trying to engage and mobilize their congregations on how to reach out," says Mr. Snow. "What Partners has figured out is that many congregations are passionately interested in

their space. For spiritual reasons. For financial reasons. Because, really, it's their home."

Sources of Grants

Grants for churches are not as scarce as conventional wisdom would have it.

The Lilly Endowment, in Indianapolis—one of the nation's largest foundations, which reported \$7.3-billion in assets last

year—gives extensively to religious causes, including the restoration of church buildings, and was an early supporter of Partners for Sacred Spaces.

And some smaller grant makers, such as the Cecil B. Day Foundation, in Norcross, Ga., and the Leonard C. and Mildred F. Ferguson Foundation, in Akron, Ohio, specifically include churches in their philanthropic missions. Also, the federal government and some states are relaxing their prohibitions on providing money for church buildings.

A strict interpretation of the Constitutional prohibition against government support for religion had previously prevented most church-related historic-preservation projects from qualifying for state or federal grants.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation had tried unsuccessfully to get the federal policy changed, and in 2003 it finally prevailed in a landmark case involving Boston's historic Old North Church. The National Park Service had denied the church a repair grant on the grounds it was an active house of worship. But under pressure from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Partners for Sacred Places, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and others, the park service reversed itself and awarded Old North Church \$317,000.

"It wasn't until the Old North Church example presented itself that the issue was so clearly defined as one of common sense," says Paul Edmondson, general counsel of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in Washington, and a Partners board member. Mr. Edmondson says Partners played a key role in reversing federal policy. In spite of the change at the federal level, he says, states are still divided over the use of tax money for historic preservation at churches.

But twenty-two states, according to Mr. Jaeger, now allow historic-preservation funds to go to houses of worship. Also, he notes, government grants typically account for between 10 percent and 15 percent of the money raised in a capital campaign that follows the Partners model.

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Neighborhood 'Anchors'

All the tools available to congregations—seeking grants, creating a separate nonprofit entity for fund raising, leasing space to outside groups, as well as stepping up internal fund-raising efforts—have been tried by Calvary United Methodist Church.

The stained-glass domes, whose sale precipitated the church's watershed crisis, are still home in Philadelphia. The Chicago collector who acquired them became so moved by the church's revitalization that he not only agreed to forgo their acquisition but also donated \$60,000 toward the Calvary Center capital campaign.

"Sometimes it's better when you put [stained glass] back to its original context," says Richard Driehaus, the collector who bought the domes. "I collect stained glass to protect it."

Mr. Driehaus, who created a foundation that supports historic preservation and community revitalization and seeks to protect open space in Chicago, quickly realized how closely aligned his fund's mission is with that of Partners for Sacred Places, and he agreed to underwrite a new Partners regional office in Chicago.

"We have a lot of churches in Chicago—it's a big immigrant community," says Mr. Driehaus. "They are anchors for their neighborhoods."

He adds, "If you tear them down, it's really giving up on the situation."



Partners for Sacred Places