

Preservation Profile: The Church Of St. Luke in the Fields New York, New York

"Rebuilding St. Luke's"



Figure 2: The Interior Before the Fire

"Those Who Sow With Tears, Will Reap With Songs of Joy"

On March 7, 1981, while going about my normal Saturday morning routine at the local shops and grocers around Greenwich Village, a newspaper headline caught my eye. "Landmark Church Burns!" it screamed; but I didn't give the headline a second thought. That afternoon a friend called, and inquired if I were okay. Confused, I asked what he was talking about. "I was driving up Hudson Street last night around midnight," he said, "and I saw your church burning down." Well, I rushed right over to the church to discover that St. Luke's was indeed, the landmark church featured in the newspaper headline. The fire had burned the church beyond recognition. The roof had caved in and one wall of the church had collapsed. The interior was a complete shambles, filled with debris and puddles of mud. It all seemed like a bad dream. We at St. Luke's were all sure about only one thing that terrible Saturday. We would rebuild.

The third oldest church building in Manhattan, St. Luke's was built in 1822 to serve the growing population of Greenwich Village-then a prosperous suburb of New York City. Constructed of rose-pink brick brought over from Holland as ship's ballast the church was a simple Federal building sitting in the midst of open fields-hence the name "St. Luke in the Fields."

Fundraising literally began the day after the fire. Donations started pouring in from nearby residents and people throughout the New York City area. These ranged from a few pennies given by school children and a check from Zito's Bakery on Bleecker Street to our first large grant, given by the congregation of a New York City synagogue.

The fundraising campaign for the reconstruction began in earnest several weeks later when we hired a fundraising consultant. The architect's estimate for the rebuilding determined our overall need at about \$5 million. Only \$1 million was covered by insurance, so our committee was presented with the Herculean task of raising \$4 million. We first set up the organizational structure of the campaign. The vestry (Board of Trustees) was to continue to administer the day-to-day operation of the parish as if the fire had never happened. A Rebuilding Committee was established to oversee the fundraising campaign and the reconstruction of the church. The committee was composed of the clergy, two lawyers (who were members of the parish), two members of the vestry, the Clerk of the Works, and the parish's resident liturgical expert.

I was one of two people asked to serve as Co-Chair for the Rebuilding Committee. I had been a parishioner for quite some time, and my children attended St. Luke's School, so had a strong personal connection to the parish. I also knew the world of non-profit fundraising in New York City. Besides serving on the staff of the American Friends Service Committee, my experience on various Boards of Directors and as Chairman of the local Community Board gave me particular strengths to bring to the work. My Co-Chair had extensive experience in managing money, and together we made a good team.

By the summer of 1981, the "Friends of St. Luke's" had been formed. This group of distinguished New Yorkers, comprising leading residents of Greenwich Village and representatives from the political, preservation, literary, and arts communities, volunteered their names to the campaign. Their support lent a great deal of credibility to our efforts and proved invaluable in securing major grants from found and prominent individuals.



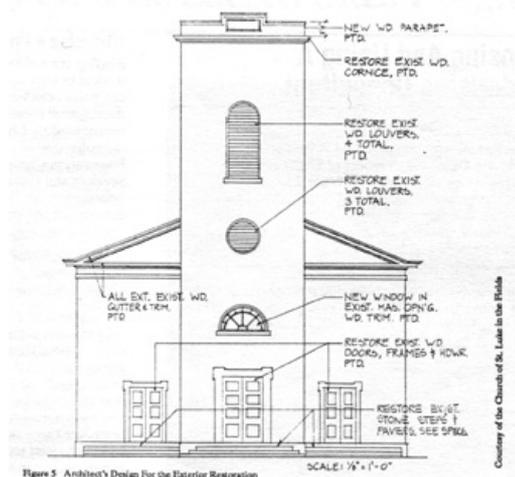
Figure 3: The Interior the Day After the Fire

An extremely important aspect of the parish's fundraising strategy was the design for the rebuilt church. The parish hired the architectural firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer Associates to re-design the church, incorporating the tower and the three exterior walls that had survived. Although the proposed design was based on the old church, it was not a carbon copy. The arches of the Byzantine Revival sanctuary were to be re-created, although without the Victorian embellishments. A new screen of Tucson columns, echoing the old one, was to surround the altar. Hugh Hardy designed new fanlight windows that recalled the originals and, like the originals, were to be filled with hand blown panes of glass. Outside, the surviving walls and tower were to be retained and repaired. A parapet on the top of the tower that had been removed about 100 years previously was to be restored. Otherwise, the exterior was to remain unaltered, except at the West End. To replace the old featureless wall that had collapsed during the fire, Hardy designed a new apse with an ambulatory and an adjacent sacristy. This section of the building was to be wholly new and wouldn't pretend to be otherwise; yet it was also in keeping with the overall architectural character of the church. The City's Landmarks Preserve Commission, as well as the congregation approved the proposal. St. Luke's would look unmistakably and beautifully like St. Luke's again; yet in a thousand small, equally beautiful ways, it would be an original creation.

Our first organized fundraising efforts focused on our congregation. In the days immediately following the fire every member of the parish had been asked to make a contribution. Our reasoning was that we could more easily approach potential donors with the knowledge that every member of the parish had already contributed something.

We again approached the members of the parish as part of a more organized pledge campaign. Like many urban congregations, St. Luke's is a diverse group of people composed of young and old, single and families, gay and straight-and this diversity extended to the socioeconomic spectrum as well. While St. Luke's did include some well to do people among its members, it also included people who were on fixed incomes or on public assistance. This made a realistic goal for in-parish fundraising difficult to determine. After careful research and analysis we established a parish fundraising goal of \$250,000.

The parish campaign was planned to be carried out over a three-year period, and every member of the parish was to receive a direct, personal solicitation. Our general "41 rule of thumb" was that each member take his or her normal annual pledge to the parish's operating budget and pledge the same amount to the capital campaign for each year of the campaign. For some of our members this was clearly impossible; however, other members were able to make very substantial and generous pledges. As a result, our parish pledges drive was successful, and we reached our goal.



Outside Support

Besides the insurance settlement, our first large outside commitment of funds came from Trinity Church, the oldest Episcopal parish in New York City. Trinity had donated the land on which St. Luke's was built back in the 1820s and had assisted St. Luke's financially and spiritually throughout its history. A generous initial challenge grant from Trinity helped leverage funds from foundations in New York City and also proved invaluable in approaching some other endowed Episcopal parishes.

When dealing with foundations, we found (not surprisingly) that just being ourselves usually impressed potential donors more than overly slick presentations. For example, the Clerk of the Works or even the construction workers themselves usually gave potential donors tours of the construction site. We usually tried to arrange visits from foundation representatives when there was a lot of activity going on. Older people from the parish's "Caring Community" lunch program sitting out in the garden while children played in the playgrounds, vividly demonstrated, in a way that no fundraising pitch could, the important role St. Luke's played in the community.

Neighborhood solicitation

Because local residents had reacted so quickly and generously to the news of the fire, we decided early in the campaign to make Greenwich Village a major focus of our fundraising efforts. We organized a door-to-door canvass of Greenwich Village residents. Volunteers from the parish and elsewhere went around from house to house, apartment building to apartment building, and left a sticker, button, and envelope under people's doors. This was not a simple task. As any New Yorker knows, security is a major concern in this city, and it wasn't always easy to get into apartment buildings. We were able to devise certain strategies to deal with these contingencies. For example, if a campaign volunteer knew the resident of a particular apartment building, we would ask that person to buzz the St. Luke's volunteers into the building. We also published inserts in "The Villager," the local neighborhood newspaper, which assured the community that we were rebuilding the church and kept people up-to-date on the progress of the campaign. The inserts also included tear-off sheets with suggested contributions. Despite occasional discouragement, especially in the door-to-door campaign, our local fundraising efforts turned out to be worthwhile. We received some generous contributions and were able to develop a mailing list of over 2,000 local residents whom we

approached several times over the course of the campaign.

What We Have Learned

Every Capital Campaign is unique. It must be devised to meet the needs of a particular institution in a particular place at a particular time doing particular things and offering particular services. Thus, it is extremely difficult to make generalizations about why our campaign was successful. However, as I look back, certain points stand out in my memory as being key to our success of campaign. We believe that these can be applied to other projects.

In our experience, a capital campaign will not be successful unless people believe that it will be a success. Few people or institutions, even members of a congregation, will give to a project that they believe will fail. People must be enthusiastic and put out the tremendous energy needed to make the campaign a success.

We found that donors and potential donors must be kept up-to-date on the progress of the campaign. We invited people to see the construction in progress. This helped maintain the enthusiasm necessary to keep the project going and helped donors maintain a sense of personal interest and ownership of the project.

We also found that the members of a congregation must take personal responsibility for the success of the campaign. Fundraising consultants can do the day-to-day work of gathering research, putting together proposals, writing thank-you notes, and arranging special events. Ultimately, however, members of the congregation must take the necessary steps to make the campaign successful. While fundraising counsel can certainly help with training and certain specific skills, no one can come in and do the job for you.

As in many campaigns, a major hurdle that we overcame was the reluctance on the part of many people in the congregation to do direct personal solicitations. Most people find asking for money embarrassing. After an initial request for volunteers for the door-to-door campaign produced no result, our rector, Ledlie Laughlin, stood up in church and announced that all the members of the parish were part of the fundraising team and asked that they do their share in direct solicitation. Parishioners were given training by our fundraising counsel. As a result, the members of St. Luke's learned how to ask for money in an enthusiastic, friendly, and non-judgmental way, and were able to proceed with the direct solicitation campaign with confidence and a high and happy heart.

We found it necessary to recognize the limitations and special character of our parish and work within those limitations. We did not uncritically adopt fundraising techniques that were devised for other institutions in different circumstances. We realized, for example, that an elaborate and expensive benefit, which might work for an organization like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, would have required far more time, energy, and up-front money than anyone at St. Luke's was prepared to give. And we had no assurance that such an effort would even raise enough money to cover costs.

We avoided conventional direct mail techniques for the same reason. We did engage in some low cost direct mail using lists developed from our door-to-door neighborhood solicitations and a list of well-to-do donors that was given to us, so the risks were minimized. Many of us also asked our friends and family for donations.

We went to every potential donor twice. Toward the end of our project the campaign ran out of steam while we were still \$1 million short. With no new prospects in sight, we decided to approach our donors a second time. Many foundations and endowed episcopal parishes made second grants, as did many of our individual donors. That last million dollars turned out to be among the easiest money to raise.

The high level of local support for the project also helped us in our efforts with foundations and corporations. It demonstrated that the parish was important to the community. Often members of a congregation don't realize that their church or synagogue is a major community institution that people want to support. During the course of the campaign we discovered that St. Luke's was much beloved in the community-not just for the programs and services it provided, but also for the simple, unpretentious beauty of the church building itself and its surrounding gardens. People really cared that we were there.

How We Have Changed

St. Luke's changed as a parish as a result of the campaign. On a practical level, we learned that the maintenance of a religious building requires a certain amount of money, time, and energy. This may seem obvious; however, it wasn't to us. The fire at St. Luke's occurred as result of spontaneous combustion caused by rotting wood in a moisture-laden and unvented crawlspace under the church. While such a devastating fire is a rather dramatic example of what can happen when basic maintenance concerns are left unattended, thousands of other houses of worship are at risk for similar disasters.

The rebuilding effort increased our awareness of, and our pride in, the beauty of our place. A beautiful building is not an essential ingredient in any person's faith. However, until we spent four years worshipping under makeshift circumstances in our school gym, with a basketball hoop over the altar and a free-throw line at our feet, I don't think any of us at St. Luke's realized, on a truly visceral level, how important our church was to us.

Our rebuilding campaign gave us a much clearer understanding of the importance of our institution to the community. Local support of the campaign had been crucial to its success and has continued to play an important role in the funding of some of the parish's programs. For example, we continue to use one of the mailing lists developed during the campaign to help support our ministry to people with AIDS. This brings between \$10,000 and \$15,000 every year.

By the same token, the rebuilding campaign reinforced in us the realization that St. Luke's exists not only for its own members but also for everyone who passes within its shadow. Besides providing space for program and ministry, institutions like St. Luke's provide tangible signs of stability in a city like New York that are important to everyone.

Home Again

The campaign for the rebuilding of St. Luke's was successful. Blessed with the unflagging leadership of our rector, Ledlie

Laughlin, we raised all the money needed to complete the church interior by the summer of 1985. On November 17, we re-consecrated the church with solemn ceremony and ancient ritual. The church was packed. Silk vestments of white, red, and gold brocade, made especially for the occasion, shimmered in the evening light coming through the hand-blown glass of the windows. As the service progressed, the altar was anointed with oil and vested for the celebration of the Eucharist. Bread and wine were taken, blessed, and distributed. All of our efforts had been worth it. We were home.