

## When congregations die, do landmarks survive?

The granite gablet above the door of the North Philadelphia church still displays the hand carved appellation "Deutsche Evangelist Kirche" (German Evangelical Church), but the modern bulletin board says "Templo Arca de Salvacion" (Arched Temple of Salvation). The two signs say a great deal about the changes that this struggling, destitute neighborhood has undergone, first established by northern European immigrants, many of them German, in the late 19th century, since supplanted by blacks and Hispanics. The rapid demographic changes experienced by urban neighborhoods such as this in the last four decades are familiar enough, but less has been told about the rough transition endured by their institutions, and in particular their churches. And least known of all is the story of deterioration, fire and demolition associated with their worship places, many of them historic.

The fact is that more than half of the churches in many poor urban areas has changed hands since World War II. Many have stood vacant for months or years after the dissolution of a congregation or parish, vulnerable to arson and vandalism. Many others have been bought by congregations unable to properly maintain them, so the buildings continue to suffer much like the housing stock surrounding them. Thus, some of our most magnificent historic buildings, larger and more elaborate than most other building types but ineligible for most kinds of government, foundation and corporate support, are moldering away, depriving future generations of a heritage that is unique and irreplaceable.

Near the Templo Arca de Salvacion are almost 40 church buildings in the southern Hunting Park and Fairhill neighborhoods" located east of Broad Street and west of the riverfront communities of Port Richmond, Kensington and Frankford. Signs of the former middle class prosperity of the area are very visible in worship places. Which range from the large-scale exuberance of St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church on North Broad Street to the unassuming, redbrick modesty of the Second Mennonite Church at Franklin and Indiana Streets to the east. A few have major architectural significance, many are landmarks on their respective blocks, and almost all are old enough and well designed enough to have character. The walls are of stone, usually durable hand-cut granite, the towers are dignified and stately, and doorways and windows are handsomely detailed with carved stone and wood.

Due to the rapid flight of whites from the area, more than half of the churches in this area has changed hands in the last several decades. Several Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches have closed, usually replaced by independent evangelical congregations that are not affiliated with one of the traditional denominations. Most main line churches have had a notoriously difficult time adapting to the rapid change of population in inner city areas. White, elderly congregations have often been slow to welcome new residents of a different racial or ethnic character. Even those that have encouraged the integration of their congregations have suffered from debilitating decreases in income due to the lower earning levels of the newer members.

In some cases, churches have seen changes from a white congregation to a black or Hispanic congregation of the same denomination, but more often the change been from one denomination to another. The Fairhill Friends Meeting, for example, has become the Ephesians Baptist Church, and St. Matthew's United Church of Christ has become the Faith Tabernacle Congregation.

Congregations here and elsewhere the nation, often burdened with fearful, unimaginative leadership, have eventually disbanded after years of gradually decreasing membership. The size and complexity of their buildings, built for a much larger and more active membership, will usually put strains on the human and financial resources of the church that can hasten the end. But the process of giving up is always painful and damaging to both the congregation and the building. A long, drawn out death struggle can result in neglected repairs and postponed maintenance that will put any new occupant at an immediate disadvantage.

Because individual congregations, denominational officials and even a city's preservation groups often have only an incomplete idea of the relative importance of the churches in its outlying neighborhoods, few have been given the recognition and protection they deserve. Thus, all are subject to the vagaries of congregational ebb and flow, and even the greatest among them can suffer the cruel ignominy of abandonment and, ultimately, demolition.

A useful case study of congregational obsolescence and building turnover can be found in the Methodist churches which have been closed in Philadelphia over the last ten years. Once the greatest presence in Philadelphia Protestantism with over 170 churches in this city alone, the number has dwindled to only 80, with one or two closed annually over the last several years. Between 1976 and 1986, 16 congregations were discontinued or merged with other congregations. In three cases, Hispanic or black Methodist congregations were established in the old buildings, and in another case, a building has been reused as a shelter for homeless men.

However, 10 buildings have passed out of the hands of the Methodist denomination and have, therefore, been subject to the difficulties of transition and new ownership. They include (in order of decreasing age):

- Emmanuel Church, 25th and Brown Streets, designed by the Hewitt Brothers in 1881.
- Cooper Memorial Church, 63rd Street and Girard Avenue, designed by Benjamin D. Price in 1890.
- Tioga Church, 18th and Tioga Streets, designed by Frank R. Watson in 1893.
- St. Luke's Church, So. Broad and Jackson Streets, designed by Thomas Lonsdale in 1894.
- Eden Church, Lawrence Street and Lehigh Avenue designed by Rev. Gladstone Holm in 1894.
- Church of the Advocate, Wayne Avenue and Queen Lane designed by Henry W. Wilson in 1905.
- Erie Avenue Church, 7th Street, Erie and Rising Sun Avenues, designed by George Savage in 1909.
- Orthodox Street Church, Orthodox Street and Torresdale Avenue designed by George Savage in 1916.

- Oak Lane Church, Cheltenham Avenue and 12th Street, designed by William Blithe in 1924.

What do these buildings have in common? They were all built between the Centennial Exposition and the Great Depression, and the substantial size and decorative quality of each is richly suggestive of the history of their congregations and the skills of their builders and artisans. Significant architects that are well known for their design in the Victorian period designed two. Emmanuel Church was the first church design in Philadelphia by the Hewitt Brothers, a firm that would later establish a first-rate reputation for other buildings such as St. Martin's-in-the-Fields (Episcopal) in Chestnut Hill and St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Germantown. St. Luke's is an important design by Thomas Lonsdale, who designed the Baptist Temple for the immensely popular preacher, Rev. Russell Conwell, and many others for Protestant congregations throughout the region. At least three or four would qualify individually for the national or local historic registers, and two or more of the others would qualify as part of historic districts. Nearly all, however, have been important to their streets and neighborhoods, and the beauty and quality of life on those streets would be drastically compromised if they were lost.

However, because the architectural and historical value of these buildings is not generally recognized, it has not been a factor in the decision to dissolve the congregations, nor was it operative in their disposition. Thus, all have been sold free of any stipulations for their preservation. Likewise, none have been designated as historic for either the National Register of Historic Places or the local register.

The fate of Methodist churches has, unfortunately, been typical of many other religious buildings in outlying urban areas that are poorly documented and little recognized for their architectural and environmental significance. The second part of this article will be published in the fall, 1987 issue of *Inspired* and deal with the current state of repair of these buildings, discussing their prospects for the future.