

REVIVAL AT CALVARY

A Twenty-Year Partnership Helps Revitalize
a Community and Save a Neighborhood Beacon



AT THE INTERSECTION
OF HERITAGE, FAITH,
& COMMUNITY

Partners for Sacred Places

By Richard Kirk, Calvary United Methodist Church

This is a story that is closely intertwined with the history of Partners for Sacred Places. What happened at Calvary United Methodist Church in West Philadelphia over the last decade-and-a-half parallels much of Partners' life. Partners and the project to save Calvary grew up together. The church was one of Partners' earliest undertakings and remains a project closely associated with Partners to this day. It serves as a model for Partners' approach to helping congregations communicate their heritage of service and outreach, and extending that heritage by strengthening the surrounding community in creative new ways.

A Grand Building Crumbles

Calvary United Methodist Church's granite ten-story tower soars over one of Philadelphia's most gracious Victorian street corners at 48th Street and Baltimore Avenue, standing guard over stately old mansions and townhouses. In some ways it looks like time has stood still for over a century.

But looks can be deceiving. In the early 1990s, things here weren't so serene. At that point, it was an open question whether it was possible to save the magnificent church building – and its two, three-story-high Tiffany windows, the largest in the Delaware Valley. Visitors were invariably awestruck when seeing the sanctuary for the first time.

The power of Calvary's architecture stemmed in part from the unexpected interior layout and decor. Given the granite English Gothic exterior, visitors would expect to encounter a dark, rectangular columned nave with beamed ceiling and gothic arches. But instead, a lofty trapezoidal domed space greets them, sunlit by the riot of color from a central stained glass dome and the massive Tiffany windows on the angled sides. In front, instead of a typical chancel, Calvary features a wide arch framed with yellow scagliola columns and filled with a forest of gigantic organ pipes under an intricately carved wooden crown, dramatically backlit by one of the nation's first examples of indirect electric lighting!

Along with amazement, visitors also registered shock over the deteriorated condition of the room, more or less abandoned for a quarter century. Gaping holes in the walls, hundred-pound chunks of plaster fallen from the ceiling, and ample evidence of indoor rainfall tended to transform amazement into stupor.

A Desperate Decision

Like so many grand 19th-century churches, Calvary had fallen victim to changing demographics in the 1970s, which left the congregation unable to maintain the building. When structural problems became apparent, and even threatening, nothing could be done. So, in 1990, the disheartened congregation decided to sell the building- Tiffany windows, world class organ and all - and put a price on it which today would not purchase even one of the neighboring houses. However, because of the condition of the building and its location, no one was interested in taking on such a burden, so it continued to deteriorate.

After three years of uneasy limbo, the congregation decided to significantly reduce the building's price, and to sell the Tiffany windows separately. When the wider community learned of the decision, however, it approached the congregation with concern and alarm. Was there any way to keep the building intact and congregation active? The United Methodist Bishop was called upon to intervene. Bowing to the growing chorus of concern, she agreed to halt the removal of the stained glass domes (they had already been sold), so that community leaders and congregation members could review all possible options.

Unexpected Support from Calvary's Neighbors

Among those who were acutely aware of the situation at Calvary was Bob Jaeger, one of the co-Directors of the newly formed Partners for Sacred Places. He and others helped form the Friends of Calvary (FoC), a group of concerned long-time community residents who sought a solution that could help the struggling congregation and at the same time save the building. Given the many stories of success that Partners had begun to gather in its resource library, the Information Clearinghouse, Jaeger believed the situation was not beyond hope.

One such parallel was in Oakland, CA, where Jackue Warren and other leaders at First Unitarian Church tapped Partners' expertise to develop a sophisticated approach to restoring its building, damaged by an earthquake. After raising funds from neighbors and local foundations to produce a comprehensive study outlining

the structural and restoration problems that needed to be addressed at Calvary, FoC hired Warren to conduct a series of focus groups in the neighborhood. Warren took great pains to reach all the diverse stakeholders in the community, asking them one key question: If we could save the Calvary building, what would you like to see happen there?

Surprisingly, responses were remarkably similar across the board. First, everyone felt strongly that the building should remain a sacred place; they were resolute in their objection to a “church museum.” They hoped that the original congregation would remain. Second, the neighborhood noted that public space for community activities was scarce, and wanted to see space developed for community activities. Many felt that Calvary could serve this purpose. Third, people felt that a local venue for culture and the arts could spur commercial development on Baltimore Avenue, a handsome “Main Street” that had become woefully dilapidated.

Forming a Supporting Non-profit organization

Moving the congregation, which had reluctantly concluded that it needed to leave its building, to reconsider its decision and partner with the community was not easy, and much time was spent in trying to reach consensus. In the end, despite some defections, the congregation made the decision not only to stay, but also to redevelop the building to serve all three goals defined in the focus groups: a building that would support secular community activities, a building that would serve as a venue for the performing arts, and a building that would remain a sacred space.

The congregation, as owner of the building, had interests it wanted to protect. On the other hand, the community wanted to be sure that its input was taken seriously and have a sense of “ownership.” Neighbors wanted to be included in the decision-making process and the decisions themselves.

An independent non-profit organization was a means to resolve these issues. A compromise was reached in which the church Trustees appointed a “majority of one” to the board of directors. This person would vote with the church if any decision was seen as detrimental to the church. Community residents would make up the remaining members of the board. Also, Calvary’s



Summer camp students at Curio Theatre Company, one of several groups that now call Calvary UMC home.

Trustees were given power to veto any decision that could not be legally supported by the United Methodist Church. So, in 2000, a new non-profit organization was formed: the Calvary Center for Culture and Community (Calvary Center), whose mission was to redevelop, repair and restore the building.

The formation of the Calvary Center was key for several reasons. First, the congregation welcomed additional help in raising money, managing a capital campaign and making major repairs to the building. Second, a separate and independent organization would serve as a vehicle in which non-church members from the community could participate as a legitimate part of the redevelopment process. Third, everyone realized that the project, which had a secular purpose, would have access to funders that would not support a congregation directly.

Continued Support from Partners for Sacred Places and Community Groups

Partners was intimately involved in the intricate negotiations around forming the non-profit Calvary Center and helped the process in a variety of ways over the years. For example, Partners contacted the buyer of the domes in the hope that he would be willing to let the church retain them. The buyer was so inspired by the momentum to restore the building that after agreeing to rescind the purchase, he made a \$60,000 grant to the church to begin repairs.

Partners also included Calvary in its pilot *New Dollars/ New Partners* training program, which bolstered Calvary’s

capital campaign, and provided advice, labor, and even board members to work on the project. When Partners launched its Philadelphia Regional Fund for Sacred Places in 2006, Calvary received a \$100,000 grant for building repairs. Partners also provided two smaller grants for special projects, and helped the Calvary Center obtain major foundation support for a variety of additional grants.

Several local organizations also helped to ensure success. Notably, the University City Historical Society (UCHS), which was the first organization to understand the strategic importance of the building, provided the organizational umbrella for the Friends of Calvary. The University of Pennsylvania Law School helped Calvary incorporate the Calvary Center, and the Historic Preservation Department at Penn's Graduate School of Design did a major study to determine what the original interior looked like, to guide the restoration effort. Later, the University City District (UCD), a Business Improvement District formed to improve the quality of life and physical plant of the community, soon partnered with the Calvary Center, directing organizations to Calvary as possible tenants. UCD also donated funds for exterior beautification efforts such as new signage, nighttime lighting for the stained glass, and landscaping design. Neighbors pitched in by designing, building and maintaining the Calvary gardens.

Restoring the Church

To date, the Center has achieved enormous success. It has raised more than a million dollars for major structural repairs, renovation and restoration of the building. All spaces of the immense building are being used. Only the sanctuary awaits full restoration, though it too is regularly utilized. A new roof was installed, and the heating system was completely overhauled. The two main granite-clad gable walls, which had shifted more than a foot-and-a-half out of plumb and threatened to fall onto the sidewalk below, were dismantled, had new supports installed and then reconstructed. Additional work included deep-relief plaster repair, restoration of the bishop's office, and bringing the kitchen back to working condition.

Building Community

The Center has also worked to redevelop the building for new uses, and here the Center's work has far exceeded expectations. Today, the building – once almost empty – is a true community center, home to many different organizations.

UCHS was among the first groups to establish its permanent offices at Calvary, underscoring its recognition of the importance of this kind of preservation and redevelopment work. Cedar Park Neighbors, a five-hundred-family community group



A stunning example of Calvary UMC's Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass windows.

representing Calvary's neighborhood, also established its offices at Calvary. Several other groups established permanent offices at Calvary, including Prometheus Radio Project, a group that sets up community radio stations all over the world, and advocates nationally for freedom and non-consolidation of the airwaves. The Literacy Center of Philadelphia and the Mariposa Food Co-op use the building for staff meetings and group work. Three large twelve-step groups make Calvary home, each meeting there several times weekly. Local bakers use the newly updated kitchen. The building is often used for town meetings in the neighborhood, for retreats, and for meetings of a variety of organizations. Calvary has become the community's unofficial town hall.

The building also serves as a venue for the performing arts, as envisioned by the original focus groups. The Crossroads Music Series, currently in its seventh year, organizes a full season of world music concerts. The Curio Theatre Company made its home at Calvary in 2004. Its full theater season is presented on the flexible staging built at the front of the sanctuary space. Special concerts and events are performed on a space-available basis, including the annual neighborhood talent show, which was founded at Calvary in 2005. The Calvary Center has become well established as the primary venue for culture and the arts in the neighborhood.

A Spiritual Incubator

And, of course, Calvary remains a sacred space. The Calvary United Methodist Church remains in its own building, and is finally beginning to grow again. Today, the Calvary congregation views the Calvary Center and shared building use as one of its most important ministries. But Calvary UMC no longer worships alone at Calvary – there are five other Christian congregations that call Calvary home, including a Mennonite congregation, an Ethiopian congregation, and three Pentecostal congregations. Calvary made local history when the first synagogue in the neighborhood in more than half a century – Kol Tzedek, a new Reconstructionist congregation – was established and housed in the church. Several interfaith services have been a real highlight for all the congregations. If anything, Calvary is more meaningful as a sacred space than ever before.

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The “Halo Effect”

Calvary been able to share space at well-below market rates, and yet income from building use now pays for the sexton, the building administrator, all building utilities, and day-to-day maintenance and repairs. Calvary Center continues to raise money for the large renovation and restoration projects. Calvary UMC has been able to achieve a balanced budget every year.

All this activity has helped to build community, perhaps the most important dividend of all. Over the last several years, encouraged in part by Calvary's renaissance, seven restaurants have sprung up in the blocks surrounding Calvary, and a new bookstore, two coffee houses, a wellness center and a second venue for the performing arts have created a revitalized Baltimore Avenue. The University City District made Baltimore Avenue an official Commercial Corridor, with new street lighting and new green spaces up and down the avenue. The whole area has a vibrant, welcoming look, and people are using it as a destination for evening entertainment in their own neighborhood. Moreover, members of the congregations that relocated to Calvary have bought houses in the immediate neighborhood.

The Calvary project has become a model for Partners primarily because it is a manifestation of Partners' blueprint for the redevelopment of old religious buildings. While each sacred place and community is unique, Partners has demonstrated that treating the sacred place as an asset – acknowledging its value and potential by seeking new partners and new dollars from new sources, and by serving the community in new ways – is an approach that is applicable to many different situations. And every time another sacred place is reclaimed as an important asset, another community is made stronger.