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News

National Trust for Historic Preservation

Saving Seattle's First United Methodist Church: Coalition-Building, Persistence, and Vision Preserve Historic Urban Sanctuary

This past May, when a long-waged, high profile, and -- at times -- contentious , collaborative effort to preserve Seattle's First U n i t e d Meth o d i s t Church (1908) culminated in a win-win solution acceptable to a complex group of stakeholders, it served as a potent reminder that preservation's 'good fights' frequently require a commitment to the long haul. In an advocacy effort that first took root in the mid-1980's, the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, Historic Seattle, Friends of First United Methodist Church, and Save Our Sanctuary, worked in coalition with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Western Office to preserve the building, a rare survivor in an area increasingly dominated by new construction and high rise towers. Since the sanctuary's uncertain future first became a topic, preservationists have argued that First United is a community asset and an irreplaceable link to Seattle's early history. The cream colored, terra cotta-clad building, with large stained-glass windows and a red tiled dome, provides a marked contrast in scale and architectural detail to the corporate and city government office buildings that surround it. Located at 811 Fifth Avenue and Marion Street, the church building was designed by architects James Schack and Daniel Huntington and will soon reach its hundredth anniversary.

In 1985 the City of Seattle attempted to designate the sanctuary a landmark, but designation was opposed by the congregation. Like many urban American congregations, facing dwindling numbers and increasingly ambitious service programs, First United's leadership hoped to sell the downtown church and parcel for redevelopment in order to construct a smaller church and create an endowment to support its burgeoning community outreach programs. Then in 2003 FUMC and the Rainier Club jointly applied for planning approval of a proposed multi-story office tower on the First United site, calling for demolition of the historic sanctuary and for construction of a new church. In July 2004, the City approved the application without considering alternatives that would retain the historic house of worship.

In January 2003, National Trust Trustee Jennifer Emerson created the Friends of FUMC to generate community support for saving the historic structure. The group held press conferences, raised money to pay legal fees, initiated discussion and played an early role to facilitate an agreement with the church to find a suitable developer and an alternative site. In spring 2003 the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation included First United on its Most Endangered Historic Properties List. Shortly thereafter, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Urban Houses of Worship to its 2003 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, using First United among six examples of the threats faced by urban churches nationwide. The National Trust joined an already vigorous coalition that included Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, Historic Seattle, and Friends of First United Methodist Church. In

July 2004, Seattle law firm Ater Wynne filed an appeal on behalf of this coalition alleging that the City had failed to consider alternatives to demolishing the historic sanctuary. In spite of litigation, the preservation community remained committed to an open dialogue with church leadership and continued to advocate for reuse options and alternatives to demolition, stressing that meeting the congregation's needs and preservation of the historic structure weren't mutually exclusive. In September 2004, the coalition sponsored a design charrette for the site, promoting reuse ideas and alternatives to demolition. Hosted by Historic Seattle, the charrette gathered developers, architects, clergy, engineers, and preservationists and yielded several fresh alternatives that blended preservation of the sanctuary with development of the site.

In 2005 the coalition's original four preservation groups welcomed the advocacy and energies of Save Our Sanctuary, a newly formed group that helped to keep First United's uncertain fate in the spotlight. Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and King County Councilman Dow Constantine also contributed to efforts to identify compromises satisfactory to both church members and preservation advocates. Finally, in May 2008, Seattle-based developer Nitze-Stagen & Co., well known for past successes in preserving and reusing historic buildings in Seattle, rode in on a white horse with a cash and land deal that proved irresistible to First United's congregation. The sanctuary will stand and Nitze-Stagen will develop a new, 40-story office tower immediately south of the building. First United's congregation will rebuild elsewhere and nearly 3/4 of the block will be preserved as open space and historic structures.

The National Trust Community Investment Corporation has pledged to assist with rehabilitation costs by providing tax credits. Years in the making, the innovative plan to retain the iconic downtown sanctuary proves that diverse stakeholders can draw upon reservoirs of civic will and community pride to achieve preservation goals together.

In the words of David Brown, Executive Vice President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation "The National Trust worked very hard on this project, but we would not have succeeded without the relentless perseverance of our partners here in Seattle, including the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, Historic Seattle, and Friends of First United Methodist Church. This was a true team effort that will ensure a long and vibrant future for this irreplaceable Seattle landmark."