

4.7 (s)

Judi Partridge
Councillor Ward 15
Hamilton, ON

Dear Judi,

Re: St Giles Church

As you know, I served as minister of the congregation of Carlisle United Church for fourteen years until I moved to work for the regional councils of The United Church of Canada. In this more administrative position, I have the privilege of being a member of a congregation as a parishioner. After much discernment, I became part of New Vision United Church about five years ago. It's a very diverse community of faith, not larger than Carlisle United Church in the number who worship and with many from the low-income people of Hamilton. The vision of this church is to serve its neighbourhood in the downtown and to seek justice and peace. We have sought to make the space of a large sanctuary available to the arts communities of Hamilton, both as a form of connection and ministry but also as a social enterprise that may eventually raise some funds for ministry. The other source of income we are hoping for, along with serving the Hamilton community, is from the property that was St. Giles United Church, now amalgamated with the former Centenary United Church to form New Vision United Church.

Because you are so familiar with Carlisle United Church and the role the church plays in that community, I want to draw your attention to a few things that are different when "being church" in the urban part of the City of Hamilton. Although there aren't a large number of members of Carlisle United Church, many are middle-class or upper middle-class with disposable income. It is the only visible church building in the community and its people are active in serving the community which means that many folks support the annual Carlisle Festival and some make annual donations that support the congregation's budget. When there is a special need – replacing the roof or installing a new elevator – the people of the wider community of Carlisle step up to help because it is also a hub for groups like the Scouts and Guides as well as the Flamborough Food Bank.

Being church in the urban part of Hamilton is different. Many churches, like the one I think you are a member of in Waterdown, do mission by renting space and thus, being able to relocate if the focus of mission changes or demographics change. Being church means being nimble enough to change, responsive enough to adapt. Buildings with huge sanctuaries which were once filled with intergenerational families rarely can meet the current needs of Christian communities which are often smaller. While I am grateful for the ways St. Giles served both its members and the community around it for over a hundred years, that building cannot be sustained by a small group and so the decision was made by the congregation to amalgamate and bring its assets into the new community of faith, New Vision.

We are hopeful that this property can bring affordable housing to the community of Hamilton while it also helps the remaining congregation of New Vision with a stream of income.

705 Main St, East at the corner of St. Clair is an Anglican church which has been turned, predominantly, into a community hub. I have gone there to dance on occasion! It is only a couple of blocks from St. Giles so I don't think that the St. Giles building could serve the community in that function.

I don't think it is in anyone's interest to leave it sitting vacant and boarded up for the foreseeable future simply because it has been designated as a heritage site.

While I sympathize with people who mourn the loss of church buildings and a way of life that these gorgeous sanctuaries represent, my hope is for small, faithful, active Christian communities to thrive. Unless the state is willing to support these buildings and maintain them for historical and architectural reasons, I don't think it's reasonable to expect smaller Christian communities to spend all their energy maintaining buildings that no longer serve their needs. The government of Quebec has declared that churches are part of its "patrimony" or heritage and has poured money into helping maintain beautiful wooden churches I once served in the Eastern Townships. Some have few, if any, remaining members. I would be very surprised if the Ontario government or the City of Hamilton made such a choice.

I appreciate that the Council has several pressures facing it in such decisions. I urge you, both as a Councillor and as a member of the planning committee, to consider the long-term implications of the decisions about St. Giles Church which continues to be the property of The United Church of Canada held in trust by New Vision United Church.

Best wishes,

Rev. Diane Blanchard