

Pilon, Janet

Subject: From a former Pastor of Philpott Memorial Church, re: Heritage Status

From: Michael Mileski

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To: Ward 2 <ward2@hamilton.ca>; Kroetsch, Cameron <Cameron.Kroetsch@hamilton.ca>; Office of the Mayor <Officeofthe.Mayor@hamilton.ca>; Horwath, Andrea <Andrea.Horwath@hamilton.ca>

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Subject: From a former Pastor of Philpott Memorial Church, re: Heritage Status

Dear Councillors in downtown Hamilton, and especially Cllr Kroetsch and Mayor Horwath...

I am a Ward 3 resident, and was a pastor at Philpott Memorial Church (PMC) for seven years and I feel compelled to share why the implications of the City's intention to designate the building as a Heritage property ought to trouble you as much as they trouble me.

During my time as pastor, PMC's members voted overwhelmingly in favour of razing and rebuilding on the old structure's footprint. I confess I was initially resistant, since I, like many Hamiltonians, admire the building's history. However, nostalgia and personal preferences must give way to reality. Consider these two factors:

First, the church's story: The group who eventually became PMC, called the "Christian Workers' Mission" had their first home in a rented hall at the corner of King Street and MacNab in 1892 (now Jackson Square). In 1896 they relocated to the St. James Hotel on Hughson Street (now gone). They outgrew it after a year, and moved to another rented hall on the third floor of a building on James Street, S, (also gone). They outgrew this too, and moved to the Macnab Street Baptist Church in 1898 (also gone). In those days they held evening worship services at the Star Theatre on King St (also gone). PMC's first structure at its current property was built in 1901, and was later repurposed as Sunday school space when the now familiar structure was built on the corner of York Blvd and Park St in 1906. By 1922 PMC had outgrown even this space, and rented Loew's Theatre (later, Buttinsky's Bar) on King Street. Like any healthy church community, PMC has a story that stretches across many locations, most of which are long gone.

Secondly, I implore the City to consider what a church is: PMC is not like Dundurn Castle, a structure which beautifully preserves a moment in history, and the lifestyle of those who lived there (past tense). At present, the castle is no one's home. One visits the castle to step back in time. Heritage Status for Dundurn Castle aptly preserves this experience for future generations who wish to experience Hamilton's history.

By contrast, the building occupied by PMC is home to a growing, active congregation. Those who visit for a sense of history become surprised (and a little disappointed) that the leadership have made several significant updates and renovations over the years to make its interior safer and more accessible, and to remove barriers to ministry.

This is not a building that's used for an hour each week on Sundays; it is a centre for daily programs such as those which serve children, youth, seniors, addicts, shut-ins, divorcees, the unhoused, those in recovery, and those at various stages of grief. It should therefore not surprise anyone that the building's interior looks nothing like it did in 1906. Indeed the only parts of the building with the appearance of age are on the outside: its weakened roof, cracked windows, and crumbling concrete facade. PMC is not its building. The same could be said for any mosque, temple, or synagogue. A church is a community of people - a city within a city.

The takeaways are several, but I'll name two:

First, the City missed its chance to designate the original Philpott Church by about a hundred and thirty years, and again at many other points since. The current structure no more preserves the history or culture of this congregation than does Buttinsky's Bar on King Street.

Second, Heritage Status affects a church much differently than it does a historical landmark. Someday the City will have to decide whether to designate as Heritage properties our beautiful mosques, temples, and synagogues, and similarly hamstring the communities serving in those buildings. Like them, the PMC community must not be shackled to an outdated shell because of the nostalgia of those who aren't part of that community, and who don't bear the costs of living with its limitations.

In fact the church of which I am currently the Pastor, Benediction Church, is a daughter-church to PMC. Benediction was planted in 2017 by a number of families who'd been attending PMC, and shared the leadership's vision for multiplication of its urban ministry, not for nostalgia. I therefore add my voice to the large number of those in Hamilton who are pleading with the City not to designate this building as a Heritage property. PMC, like any religious community, must be allowed to seize strategic opportunities to grow and serve Hamilton well into the future.

Thank you for your time and kind attention. I am at your service, and can be reached via email or phone (905) 923-0068 if you wish to discuss this further.

Michael Mileski



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