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Interview Transcript

Sacred Spaces of Greater Cincinnati

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Interview conducted by Meg Hanrahan, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.,
at The New Church of Glendale, 2007

Churches are important reminders of our history and the ethnic heritage of the people who built those churches. Whether it's a small English-style parish church or a Roman basilica or a vertically towering German church, these are all expressions of the cultures that produced them. They're important because they are social gathering places where people come together as a community, and we're reminded that together, we are greater than we are as one. They are like public buildings, they are important symbols, and besides that, they're simply beautiful. They are the embodiment of our spiritual aspirations and they are, typically, the most beautiful buildings in any given neighborhood or community; and they are typically full of beautiful stained glass, and sculpture, and murals, and other artistic elements. And so, because of their history and their aesthetic value, I think that even if we aren't active churchgoers, there is a very strong attachment to churches.

So, what can we learn from our historic churches? Well, I think we can learn more about the ethnic heritage of the people who built them. Church architecture and the details in them are an expression of the artistic values and heritage, for example, in this church, the New church, this is an expression of an English religious sect.

Churches are in need of preservation just like our cities are in need of preservation. And there are general trends that impact them. Since World War II, particularly, people have been continuously moving outwards from cities farther and farther into the suburbs. This is just the nature of people; people move. And as they move, they leave behind the churches that they used to frequent. And neighborhoods change. In some cases, new people take over buildings that were built by others. But churches, particularly in older urban neighborhoods have become victim to the movement of people out of the cities. There are examples of churches in older suburbs, like Hyde Park, that are continuing to grow. Both the Episcopal and the Presbyterian churches have either planned or built major expansions.

But the way that we worship has changed; now we're seeing these large mega churches that are non-denominational, like the Crossroads Community Church in Oakley and others in the newer suburbs. There have been numerous Catholic churches, for example, that have closed in older neighborhoods, like St. Bonaventure in South Fairmont closed and in fact it's gone now. Walnut Hills Presbyterian is another. In fact, it's one of several churches in Walnut Hills that have been torn down because the people that originally built them and worshiped in them have moved on. So, I just think there's a constant shifting; the United States still has a strong religious tradition but there are others who have become more secular as well. Mostly, I think it's a matter of movement into newer places.

Let me talk about some examples of older churches that are still thriving. I'm thinking of Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church, which has rather a unique socially progressive congregation. It is just a spectacularly beautiful building and it has a lot of history and it is simply gorgeous. The churches that are preserved attract people from all over the city because they are drawn to those churches because of the spiritual values, the social aspects, but also because of the historic importance and the beauty of the buildings. An example is Old St. Mary's, which is in Over-the-Rhine, an early Greek revival church from the 1840's. People love that church. They come from all over the city to go there and they have invested themselves and invested their money in restoring that building because of its history and its beauty. Another one is St. Peter in Chains, downtown, right next to the City Hall, restored in the 1950's. The archdiocese had actually moved the cathedral to Clifton but in the 1950's, there was a new commitment to being downtown, and the archbishop recognized the important history and artistic value of the building and wanted to preserve it. Other examples are Christ Church, which also has a building from the 1950's. The building itself isn't historic, but the congregation is very historically important with many socially prominent members. They made a strong commitment to being downtown and also attract people from all over the city. And I'm sure there are

other examples but the history of these churches and their artistic value, their beauty, are factors that draw us to them and make us want to preserve them.

Churches aren't like other buildings. They are large, specialized buildings that require extra care. They can be expensive to heat. And, especially the artworks, for example, can require conservation. They have large expanses of roof to maintain. And if you have a congregation that's dwindling, it means you have fewer resources to maintain that building. So, you have to often look outside of your immediate congregation for sources of support. And that's where, I think, the greater community can come in. All of us, I think, have an appreciation for the historic and artistic value of these buildings, and so, I think that their preservation is a concern to the whole community.

Some of our most historic churches have been torn down. One of the most significant was the Wesley Chapel. It was built in 1831. It was a really important Greek revival structure. William Henry Harrison's funeral was held there in 1841 and John Quincy Adams spoke there. It was torn down in the 1970s and that in combination with the loss of the Albee Theatre in '77, I think, was the impetus for creating preservation legislation in Cincinnati. And I think now, we think more carefully about preserving churches.

There are numerous churches in Cincinnati I think that are in danger of being lost. There are a couple in Over-the-Rhine, Saint Paul's Church at Race and Fifteenth is one which is a very fine Greek revival church. There is another church at the corner of Twelfth and Elm that has been vacant for years. These buildings really do need help if we're going to preserve them.

Another example of a church that is in jeopardy is old St. George on Calhoun in Corryville. It's an important Romanesque Revival church by Samuel Hannaford. We thought it was rescued when in 1995 an interdenominational group took it over and operated it, but they have not been successful and now it's empty again. And a new use needs to be found for it if it's going to be saved.

When churches are demolished, sometimes it's a permanent loss. There was a church, the Holy Trinity Church that was on West Fifth Street that had Duvneek murals that were on plaster on the walls. There was no way to salvage them. So, when the church was torn down for construction of Interstate 75, these priceless murals were gone. In other cases, we're luckier; and the artworks and interesting architectural features of the building can be salvaged at times. I know stained glass windows are very often removed from buildings that are going to be torn down and then reused in other buildings, new buildings, new churches in the suburbs, for example. Some pieces in churches are so artistically important that they need to be preserved. Everybody agrees that Tiffany windows are significant. An example of Tiffany windows that were preserved were those from the Swedenborgian Church in Walnut Hills, which was demolished for I-71, but that set of windows now has become a traveling museum exhibit. Other examples are the white marble angels removed from St. Peter and Chains that are now in the Cincinnati Art Museum.

It's important to preserve our sacred spaces because they are expressions of our history and the ethnic heritage of the people who built them. They are examples of our highest aesthetic values. They are very often the most beautiful buildings in our neighborhoods. They are important because they are social gathering places, and like other public buildings, they are symbolic of our values.

The churches that are the most in danger are the ones in our inner city whose original congregations have moved away. As people move, they take their churches with them, so to speak. We are experiencing a renaissance, however, in our urban environments, and there is a great "return to the city" movement. And I think that some of these people moving back into the city are drawn to these old church buildings because they are historic and beautiful.

It takes a lot of things to successfully preserve a church. And it needs to have a strong and growing congregation, and also contributions from the greater community. There are programs that have been established to help churches learn how to reach out to the greater community and raise the money that they need. And very often they will have activities like daycare, like concerts and lectures, and other opportunities or activities that bring people in and help them realize that churches are a community resource.

I love all churches simply because they are beautiful. They are landmarks on our landscape. They are beacons of higher aspirations of our society. This church, the New Church, in particular, I think, is very unusual and distinctive. It is a rare example of a gothic revival country church in the tradition of Andrew Jackson Downing. It has very simple but elegant lines to it. It is one of the landmarks that makes Glendale special.

This church was built in 1860; and it is a wonderful little Carpenter Gothic gem. It's unusual because it's wood-framed. It has board-and-batten siding on the outside; that's very rare in Cincinnati. And it is approximately cruciform in plan. It has a wonderful, intimate worship space on the inside with high ceilings. It's very simple. It has white plastered walls, but it also has lovely, little decorative details like the stained glass windows and the fabulously carved pulpit and lectern and other furniture. The inside is a very comfortable space to be in. It's a small, intimate space; it has high ceilings, very vertical proportions. The verticality sort of lifts your spirit. It has many original details. I think the stained glass windows are just lovely. And it has beautifully carved woodwork in it, especially the lectern and the pulpit, which are very heavily and beautifully carved. I like the pews, which have a gentle curve to them, which create this sense of togetherness. I just think this is a lovely little church.

Glendale is a very special place, developed by an association of 30 investors who saw an opportunity to build a new community from scratch. This is one of the first planned communities in the United States. And it was enabled by the completion of the Cincinnati, Hamilton and Dayton Railroad. And its development is coincident with that. This church was founded by one of the prominent residents of Glendale. His name was Charles Allen. He was a wholesale druggist, and he was a Swedenborgian. Swedenborgianism was a very interesting philosophy. It was based on the concept that the material world was an expression of spiritual reality. Let me tell you about Swedenborg. Swedenborg was a Swedish inventor and philosopher, and he came up with a new way of looking at Christianity. He believed that the material world was an expression of our spiritual reality. After his death, there was a church created in England based on his philosophy in 1788, which happens to be the year that Cincinnati was founded. And Swedenborgianism attracted lots of writers and artists and intellectuals, including Edgar Allan Poe and the artists Hiram Powers and George Inness. And it caught on in the United States in the 19th century. This church was built in 1860 but there were several churches of the same sect in Cincinnati. Swedenborgians in Cincinnati also included artists like Benn Pitman and Henry Fry and his son William, who were important art carvers in Cincinnati and they were lifelong members of the church. The Frys, Henry Fry, in particular, was a vegetarian and a very interesting character. He decorated many churches in Cincinnati.

Another famous Swedenborgian was Johnny Appleseed. His real name was John Chapman and he was a good friend of one of the members of this church. He and his friend John Cook, who was a member of this congregation, used to participate in summer camp meetings in Glendale. And the bench that Johnny Appleseed created ended up in the property of the Cook family, and they donated it to this church so that it sits in the front hall today. His bench is here in the hallway. It's a wonderful legacy of him.

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