

St Matthew's Church sparks community building and neighbourhood development

Faith & the Common Good

June 15, 2020



The church building as service and host

St Mathew's United Church has a building from 1924, with 21,000 square feet located in Toronto's Wychwood neighbourhood. Shaped by the moral energy and social activism of its Methodist roots, the congregation understands its mission to be a community of faith that serves their surrounding neighbourhood. They host two other worshiping congregations. Four volunteer-based programs deliver services to the marginalized or socially isolated members of the community. The space offers so many more opportunities. St. Matthew's has long been a place that has served outside groups of various types. Situated in a central location within a highly populated neighbourhood, the demand for extra space has always been there.

The journey to its current role

In 2008, the congregation's board realized that they were running an ongoing deficit as operations and capital costs for the building were far exceeding the income. However, they had a vision: to create a gathering centre for the community. The building should be there for whatever changes the neighbourhood is going through. They hired a community outreach coordinator who assessed the market rate for rents and developed communication material that targeted the neighbouring community's needs. This brought in a set of anchor tenants and a number of individual users. With this arrangement, the congregation still has enough space for its own committees and other activities. Presently, the external users predominantly come from the arts sector, which reflects the arts-focused culture in this neighborhood. On any given day, toddlers attend music classes; young people are enrolled in a drawing course to prepare for higher education programs; violin and cello instructors are holding their lessons; yoga sessions are underway; and alternative health sessions can be attended. Artists and independent non-profit organisations use four of the church's rooms exclusively.

To initiate such close links to the neighbourhood, they established a potluck dinner for all external users. Among the various outcomes was an open day for the community to present the different activities that were going on in the church. Also, different groups pulled together their resources to carry out renovation projects with church board's approval. The initial offer of hospitality by the congregation has enabled cooperative initiatives among the external groups who use the building to serve the neighbourhood in new and innovative ways. In this way, the congregation has provided a spark that results in new partnerships that impact on the local community. As they do so, that same congregation is itself changed and renewed through participating in this new social hub.

Keys to success

A key to this success, besides the general ethos of the congregation, is its openness to change and development. As the surrounding community changes, so do the groups hosted in the church building. Today, during the opening times, 31% of the available space is used throughout the week. Whenever a group leaves the church, through word-of-mouth someone new appears. As much as the neighbourhood is changing (through gentrification, urban density increasing, and the number of marginalized and poor people living in the area increasing), St. Matthew's actively participates in responding to such change by accommodating different groups that wish to share the space with socially conscious groups.

Illustrating St. Matthew's long-term and holistic approach to social outreach is another significant factor. About 40 years ago, the congregation made part of their land available to develop St. Matthew's Bracondale House, a privately-owned, non-profit apartment building with 130 one-bedroom and bachelor apartments that house individuals aged 65 and older. The congregation is currently looking into options to develop another affordable housing project on their land.

Learn more

You can learn more about the St. Matthew's United Church through their [website](#) and the art scene in the community of Wynchwood [here](#).

