

MOVING OUR CHURCH: A HISTORY

The Search for a New Building

After occupying many buildings between 1849 and 1970, and after the merger of local Unitarians and Universalists in 1957 (4 years before the national merger), the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing moved in 1971 into a former fraternity house at 855 Grove Street in East Lansing. The congregation worked to make this space meet the needs of our congregation. The interior was remodeled, and in 1984 an Assembly Hall was added. Mortgages on the building were paid off in 1996. However, as the congregation grew larger, two Sunday morning services had to be scheduled along with two sets of Religious Education (RE) classes. The building's deficiencies, including lack of accessibility and the insufficient parking, became more prominent. During the years 2005-2009, the Strategic Planning Committee considered various options related to the building. Conclusions in 2008 of an Ad Hoc Space Planning Committee were:

- The congregation has agreed that building improvements are needed; and
- Six options have been considered (including renovation & relocation).

A condensed history of the building search, omitting the exploration of dozens of unsuitable properties, but leading up to finding the property at 5509 South Pennsylvania Avenue in 2014, was summarized for the congregation in the following way:

- 2009 – Plans were drawn up for expansion (in-house), however consultation with architectural and construction firms revealed costs were nearly twice what was estimated.
- Jan 2010 – A consultant conducted an assessment for a capital campaign and estimated \$1.2 million could be raised.
- April 2010 Congregational Meeting – The congregation approved a capital campaign for a building addition/renovation if sufficient funds were raised in the pledge drive for our staffing needs.
- Fall 2010 – The pledge drive was successful and the staffing barrier was removed (increasing the pledge drive operating funds for staff funding was deemed essential).
- November 2010 – The local real estate market was changing. A Congregational Meeting was held to consider purchase of the Holy Cross buildings which were now affordable.

- January 2011 – The Relocation Possibilities Committee (RPC) was formed to discuss Holy Cross options.
- April 2011 Congregational Meeting – Our UUA consultant was present; the Board and Strategic Planning Committee recommended exploring various relocation possibilities for 6 months (*Discovering Our Place: Six Months on the Path*); there was extensive discussion by congregation, culminating with a vote in favor of *Six Months on the Path*. The Board subsequently engaged a realtor.
- May 2011 – An appraisal of 855 Grove Street came in at \$520,000.
- June 2011 Congregational Meeting – A set of criteria was approved for a new building search. A constitutional amendment passed to require a quorum of 1/3 of members, and approval of 2/3 of members, when voting for selling or buying a building or taking out a mortgage.
- September 2011 – Cornerstone Church in Okemos was recommended by RPC for purchase. A meeting was held at Cornerstone.
- October 2011 Congregational Meeting – The approved motions included: Moving to a new location is an acceptable direction (97% voted yes out of 133 members voting); and the Board may pursue feasibility of purchasing Cornerstone, which could include making a conditional purchase offer (80% voted yes out of 144 members voting).
- November 2011 – Our UUA consultant updated the capital campaign assessment survey; we still showed the capacity to raise \$1.2 million.
- December 2011 – The Board made a conditional offer to purchase Cornerstone; the sellers provided no response.
- January 2012 Board discussion – With no movement from the sellers of Cornerstone, the Board decided to continue to look for other properties.
- 2012 – Loan application logistics were pursued, a Membership Development Plan was undertaken (which would be needed for a UUA loan guarantee); and other properties were considered by RPC.
- August 2012 – The Board unanimously agreed that we should not actively pursue major additions to 855 Grove Street.
- 2013 – Broadbent (a church in west Lansing) was recommended by RPC for purchase; we had discussions about the location; ultimately, there was not enough commitment to continue consideration of this property.
- August 2014 – The Site Task Force (newly formed in 2014) became aware of 5509 South Pennsylvania Avenue (former home of Lansing Christian School and then the Capital Area Academy).

Consideration of 5509 South Pennsylvania Avenue

During August and early September of 2014, Board members, members of the Site Task Force and others visited the building and talked with the realtors (buyer and seller) about issues involved in purchase of the property. The Capital Area Academy had gone bankrupt, and the property was owned by a bank in Minnesota which complicated the negotiations.

On September 4, 2014, the congregation was given the following information:

"In order to keep the congregation's options open, the Board has submitted an offer on the property at 5509 South Pennsylvania Avenue, contingent on several major items. The Board decided it was prudent to lock in a price before spending several thousand dollars (up to \$10,000 authorized) on inspections to determine the feasibility of renovation. As a strategic move to maximize the congregation's options and protect resources, the Board has named a sub-committee who met with our realtor on September 3, 2014 to finalize details of an offer on the property. **The purchase of this property is contingent on approval of the membership of the congregation** (as well as satisfactory inspections and obtaining a Special Land Use Permit from the City of Lansing to use the property as a church). If the site appears viable for consideration, the congregation will be invited to additional site visits and discussions."

On September 14, 2014 information about the "South Penn" property was presented to the congregation in sessions after both services. Pictures were provided along with basic information about the property. Opinions and questions were solicited, both at the meetings and through electronic means. Basic information included:

- 39,923 square feet (3 times as large as the 855 Grove Street building).
- The gym/cafeteria of about 7,200 square feet can be converted to serve as sanctuary.
- The building has excellent fire safety. It is a single story and fully accessible. The building shows sound building construction.
- It was built in stages, starting in the 1950s and continuing to 1972.
- There is parking for 300 people on Sundays.
- The property has over 9 acres of land and it is adjacent to South Lansing Pathway, a \$2.1 M hiking/biking trail.

After further investigation, positive responses and inspections, a Capital Campaign was initiated in October 2014 (during the same period as the annual Pledge Drive). On Sunday, October 26, short meetings were held after both services to explain the Capital Campaign promise options. Opportunities were organized for the

congregation to visit South Penn on Sunday, October 26, and Tuesday, October 28. On Sunday, Nov 2, informational meetings were held in the Social Hall after both services for a presentation of the Building Design committee ideas, estimates, and inspection results. After meetings with the architect on options for renovation, one of the decisions was whether to move the north gym wall to make a larger social hall – this and other features were explained to the congregation. An update in the Weekly Digest on November 5 summarized all the information presented at the Sunday sessions. On Sunday, November 9, there was a Board update in both services and Board members were available after both services to answer questions (this was scheduled for most of the Sundays that Fall).

The Board scheduled a congregational meeting on November 16, 2014, for members to vote on the proposed purchase. The following information was presented.

Rationale:

- For years, we have been trying to find a building to better meet our needs and the present size of the congregation.
- Discussion of options; preference for green space with existing building (more environmentally friendly and less expensive than new construction).
- Current building is not adequate (accessibility, size, parking, infrastructure, poor energy efficiency); will need major repairs/ improvements soon.
- South Penn property is affordable and meets criteria outlined for our future home.
- Location is on major street with bus service; close to highway interchanges; adjacent to bicycle path.
- School building is structurally sound; defects can be overcome with renovation; provides enough room for all of us to be together at one time (for a while).

Inspections (due diligence):

- No lead paint.
- Mechanical: Replace furnace in gym; replace furnace and ducting with more modern ducting for better energy efficiency and to eliminate the problem of mildew in the old ducts; new wing mechanicals are okay.
- Asbestos abatement is needed and can be professionally done.
- Roofing: replace roof on new wing; patch roof on gym; and we need an over-frame/new roof on the old wing.
- Fire sprinklers will be required if occupancy is above 300 people; new water main needed.

- In progress: ALTA land survey; Phase I environmental site assessment; preliminary reports have been received on both of these showing no major issues.

Cost estimates and financial options:

- We will need a mortgage; and
- There will be increased operating expenses in a larger building.

At that Congregational Meeting, the following motion was made:

The congregation authorizes the Board to take all steps necessary to purchase the property at 5509 South Pennsylvania Avenue, Lansing, MI.

The motion passed with 89% voting in favor.

Process of design and construction

In December 2014, the Board selected Ken Jones of Studio [Intrigue] as architect (we had been working with him for several years in looking at options for other buildings). Two Dream Extravaganza workshops were scheduled to get preliminary input from congregants on major design features for remodeling. A Dream Implementation Team (Kathy Lovell, President, Dan Dettweiler, President-Elect, Bob Swanson, chair of the Building Design Committee, and Kathy McWilliams, designated by Rev. Kathryn Bert) was established to direct and coordinate planning. In conjunction with the Board, they appointed chairs of Dream Focus Groups to recommend specific plans for various parts of the building (worship space, office/administrative space, religious education space, social hall/kitchen space, exterior/outdoor space). These focus groups, open to all congregants who wanted to be involved, started meeting in mid-January and reports were submitted in February; more than 30 members participated.

In January 2015, the Board approved a “Vision for the 5509 South Pennsylvania property as our future church home,” including the following:

Our congregation has voted to purchase 5509 South Pennsylvania Avenue to make the building and grounds into an inspiring home that expresses our core values and helps advance our mission: *The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing is a welcoming community that encourages freedom of belief and responsibility of action. Inspired by love, we honor diversity, work for justice, and continue to learn and grow throughout our lives.*

In terms of remodeling, there are two overarching values that should be general priorities in all planning for the building and grounds:

- **Welcoming/Inclusiveness/Accessibility:** We will create an inspiring home in which to welcome all (visitors and ourselves), with full accessibility that allows for full participation in congregational life for people of all abilities. This implies providing opportunities for worshiping together, studying and learning, and joining together as a community in many different ways, large and small.
- **Environmental sustainability:** We will renovate the South Pennsylvania Avenue property in a sustainable, energy-efficient, and fiscally responsible manner. We will use LEED standards and LEED-accredited professionals as a guide and document our success in meeting this goal, without pursuing formal LEED certification. (motion approved by the Board 1/14/15).

This process has involved considerable input from the congregation and staff. Goals were listed with the challenge of accomplishing as much as possible with the funds we have available, within the feasibility constraints of the building.

At the January 25, 2015, Congregational Meeting, the congregation unanimously approved final steps to sell the current property on Grove Street, and to obtain a loan (up to \$1.2 million) for construction costs.

Final closing for the purchase of the new property occurred on February 20, 2015. UU Lansing temporarily became the owner of two buildings. A team of “watch people” (coordinated by Bob Lovell) took turns going to the new property daily to make sure no problems arose. The Board discussed issues involved in selling the 855 Grove Street property, and approved a charge for a task force (led by Mary Elaine Kiener) to manage sale activities in conjunction with our attorney. The property was sold in May 2015 for \$975,000, with the provision that we would rent after closing (in August) until we vacated the building, no later than March 31, 2016.

In April and May, the Dream Implementation Team and members of the Dream Focus Groups met with the architect to make final decisions needed for detailed architectural drawings to be sent to contractors for bids. In June 2015, the architect drawings were finalized for contractor bids. These included most of the essential recommendations from our acoustics consultant.

We received bids from three contractors in early July – the bids (\$2.83M-\$2.98M) were all much higher than anticipated (in part due to high subcontractor bids). In July the Dream Implementation Team, architect, and Construction Monitoring Group (three UU Lansing congregants with construction experience) interviewed the three contractors and discussed possible changes in plans to reduce costs (known as value engineering).

The Board approved a recommendation to select Central Contracting Inc. (owned by Alan McPhall) with a maximum \$1.6 M budget, based on construction changes that would reduce costs but maintain the most important elements of the project design. The biggest change was not to move the gym wall, resulting in a much larger sanctuary to seat over 350 people (which is great), but a smaller Social Hall for now. A “cost-plus contract” was signed with Central Contracting in which "we see all subcontractor estimates and decide on final construction; and the general contractor receives a percentage above the subcontractor payments."

After the Board’s approval of the general contractor, it took several weeks to get final architect plans for the construction changes and the earliest the construction could begin was September 2015. We arranged for asbestos abatement in August/September so that would be completed prior to other construction.

Based on the final contract, we obtained a \$900,000 construction loan from Dart Bank, based on a UUA loan guarantee. During the process of working with the architect and selecting a contractor, the target date for moving was February or March (but changes in plans and surprises during the construction process would delay our move-in date).

During the spring/summer period, the Dream Implementation Team gathered information on energy efficiency options, and met with individuals from Michigan Energy Options (MEO) and our architect to discuss coordination for new construction and steps needed to get rebates from utility companies for improving energy efficiency. We noted that solar panels can be added at any stage of the process, or in a later phase, and we will continue to investigate and pursue options for energy efficiency and sustainability.

Over the course of a year, until we were able to move into the building, many very successful work parties were held, with volunteers contributing immensely to preparing for construction, preparing and painting the entire RE wing and office/administrative wing, doing many minor construction projects, and lots of items too numerous to mention. The volunteer efforts in the building were essential to making it possible for us to start using the building in June 2016. In addition to work

parties in the building, volunteers contributed in many, many other ways. For example, watchers kept watch on the building between the closing in February and the beginning of construction in September. An Interior Design group made decisions about carpets, wall color and many other issues. Members of a Construction Monitoring Group, consisting of three people with construction experience, took turns visiting the site at least once per week during the construction.

The Board created a Grounds Planning Group (GPG) in 2015 to initiate development of a site plan for the 9 acres of land. The GPG was charged with recommending options, after consultation with congregants, about management and use of the grounds, including playground spaces, plantings, and the Memorial Garden (in conjunction with the minister). Initially work focused on critters who'd taken up residence under the building, invasive species, drainage problems, necessary tree removal, clearing weeds, and the appearance of the main entrance.

Throughout the purchase, design and construction process, the Board and Dream Implementation Team made all possible efforts to keep the congregation informed of issues and progress. Updates were regularly included in the Weekly Digest, monthly newsletter and Order of Service. In-person updates and feedback sessions were held periodically to facilitate questions and discussion. For example, an information session for the congregation was held on January 10, 2016, to discuss construction progress (and challenges) and the grounds preliminary site plan in progress. A visit to the building under construction was planned in February for those interested in seeing building progress.

In February and March, construction continued, but it became clear that the construction could not be finished by April 1, when we had to be out of the 855 Grove Street building. Plans were made to hold worship services in April at the Islamic Center of East Lansing, which was a wonderful experience for all. In April, construction was proceeding, but a few glitches delayed completion, and worship services in May were held outdoors on the grounds of our new property, and some of these were combined with work parties. Finally, after synchronizing final details with required inspections, the building was approved for occupancy. We moved in on May 31 and June 1. Only 4 days later, on June 5, 2016, we held the first Sunday morning worship service (one service at 10:30 a.m.) in our new church home, with standing room only. It was Music Sunday, and we held the annual auction and a carnival after worship. It was a day of celebration and homecoming. WE MADE IT!!!

- *Kathy Lovell, Board Member*